薬屋のひとりごと
Kusuriya no Hitorigoto 15
15
Natsu Hyuuga
日向夏
illustration
しのとうこ
ヒーロー文庫

「…そういう
言い方はやめろ。
命令したくなる」
「その時は、
私は隣に
いなくてもいいですか？」
薬屋のひとりごと
15
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羅門（ルオメン）は杖（つえ）を突きながら
一番前に置かれた
椅子に座る。

扉を開けると、
苦労性でおなじみの
高順（ガオシュン）がいた。
その後ろで
雀（チュエ）がのぞき込んでいる。

翠苓（スイレイ）
はとことんやる気がない
台詞（せりふ）ばかり吐くが…

「阿多(アードゥオ)よ。おまえは朕(ちん)を恨んでいるか？」
「陽(ヨウ)よ。逆に恨まれないと思っているのか？」

猫猫（マオマオ）は一瞬止まり、
そして奇声を上げた。
「ふぉおおおおおお！」
猫猫はさっそく
ぼろぼろの書に
手を伸ばしたが、
壬氏（ジンシ）に手をはたかれる。

1. The Summons

They were now in the season where the harsh sun has relaxed its intensity somewhat.

“Work has eased up lately, hasn’t it?” Maomao said.

“You’re right,” Court Physician Ri said.

Maomao was cleaning the nap room with Court Physician Ri. It wasn’t Court Physician Ri’s job to do so, but he’ll do anything if it requires muscle power. He would go as far as to move the beds to clean under it.

The workload has gotten lighter because recently, the squabbles between military officials have decreased. Perhaps the weirdo tactician has once again been recognised as the common enemy, or the higher ups have exercised their authority.

Whichever it was, Maomao was thankful. Jinshi probably had cracked down on it.

Even so, the nap room got dirty easily. Besides letting injured or sick people sleep here temporarily, the court physicians would take naps here. That in of itself was fine, but she’d rather they stop leaving behind the bamboo skewers from their late-night snacking.

Both Maomao and Court Physician Ri worked silently once they’re focused. And so, they didn’t notice the voice calling them from the next room over.

“…iang, Niangniang!”

Only one person would ever call her in such a way. She didn’t feel like responding.

“Woah.” Tianyu found Maomao with Court Physician Ri and his face stiffened up.

“What was that woah supposed to mean?” Maomao asked.

“What? How’s your work going?” Court Physician Ri asked.

“I’ve done it. I have a business matter to take care of today, so please don’t swing your fist.” Tianyu was bad at dealing with Court Physician Ri. They were blessed that he had a natural enemy even if he looked like a guy who took everything in stride.

“So, what is this business matter?” Maomao sat down on a freshly made bed, crossed her legs and picked her ears.

“You really only barely manage to speak to me politely.”

Maomao ignored Tianyu’s words and blew on her pinky.

“Maomao, you can ignore Tianyu most of the time, but it might be an order from above. You should listen just in case,” Court Physician Ri said.

“Understood.”

“Maomao, you draw a clear line between people you listen to, and people you don’t, I see.”

“It’s just your imagination.” Maomao moved out from the nap room. The old court physician was in the medical office, checking the logs.

“I have a summons from the Moon Prince, for a fairly special matter.” Tianyu, also, in his own way, spoke politely to the old court physician.

Hearing that it was Jinshi’s summons, Maomao tilted her head in surprise. She was sure that he could have Chue come if he were to call for her, and if he were to have someone else come instead, she couldn’t think of a reason why it would be Tianyu.

“Has it to do with the western capital?” Court Physician Ri asked.

If it was about that, she could still understand.

“Right. It’ll be a little troubling to have the both of you go.”

“No, Maomao alone would be fine.”

He doesn’t call me Niangniang only at a time like this?

“I see. Then that’s fine.” The old court physician passed the log to Court Physician Ri.

“Is it fine if it’s just me and Court Physician Tianyu?” Maomao checked with the old court physician, not Tianyu.

“Niangniang has to go since it’s about medicine.”

“If that’s the case, then wouldn’t it be better if Court Physician Ri goes instead of Court Physician Tianyu?” Maomao requested to switch Tianyu for Court Physician Ri.

“I also don’t want Tianyu. I want Court Physician Ri to stay,” the old court physician also said.

“Hahaha, Court Physician Ri is popular,” Tianyu said.

“Tianyu, you’re hated everywhere.” Court Physician Ri didn’t go easy on Tianyu either.

And so, it was decided she would go to Jinshi’s place with Tianyu.

“And so, what’s the actual reason for the summons?” Maomao asked shortly after they left the medical office.

“What do you mean by actual?” Tianyu asked.

“If it’s a summons about medicine from the western capital, I think I alone would’ve been fine. But, if Court Physician Tianyu is also summoned, then it would have to be for some other reason, right?”

“Mmm, you’re sharp. Well, I’ll give you a short explanation since you’ll be getting the details from the Moon Prince.”

His condescending attitude bothered her, but she fell silent and listened.

“After the Moon Prince investigated various things, something unthinkable that’s related to my family came up.”

“I’ve absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I suppose. Then, I’ll tell you one more thing.” Tianyu, with an air of importance, made a rectangular shape with both of his index fingers and thumbs. “This.”

“Don’t, this, me.”

“A jade plaque.”

“WHAT?!”Maomao flusteredly tried to ask Tianyu. But he suddenly quickened his steps and ran away like he was shaking free from Maomao.

Thanks to that, Maomao had to sprint with all her might.

The place they were summoned to wasn’t the palace Jinshi resided in, but his office.

It’s kinda nostalgic.

The thoroughly polished windows and hallways. There were fewer civil officials carrying documents compared to before. Has work settled down somewhat?

“Haah, haah….” Maomao panted as she stopped before the office. There was no way she could catch up to a man running at full speed.

“Excuse meee.”

Maomao arrived the same time Tianyu entered the room. Thanks to that, she had no time to catch her breath either.

And as soon as she entered, she saw a person, and her heavy breathing got rougher.

“It’s been a while.” Courteously lowering his head, was a young man who had not passed twenty years of age. For all that, his gentle face was a lie. His name was Hulang.

The man who was behind the reason the bandits nearly killed her in Isei Province.

“…” Maomao immediately wanted to dropkick him, but she held back. More importantly, why was this bastard in Jinshi’s office?

“You’re here.” Jinshi was waiting in his seat. Basen was beside him as his guard. There was a section partitioned off with a strange curtain in the corner of the office, so Baryou must be there.

“Good day to you, Moon Prince. By the way, it looks like there is an unworthy person in this location, so how about we chase him out?”

“Huh?” Tianyu immediately pointed at himself. Unfortunately, there was a person more of a scoundrel than him.

“I understand your feelings very well, but Hulang is working here as a civil official. Bear with it.”

“Me?” Hulang said.

Jinshi had a slightly faraway look in his eyes. Officially, he was the younger brother of the lord of the western capital, so he couldn’t treat him with disdain.

“By the way, what’s the matter?” Maomao asked.

“From the looks of it, it doesn’t seem like Tianyu explained it to you.”

“I think he did?” Maomao spat out.

“I thought there was a duty of confidentiality, so I didn’t talk about it to outsiders. I’m sorry,” Tianyu stated lightheartedly.

“Well, fine. How about we move to the main topic?”

“Please do.”

With no court ladies around, Hulang brewed tea instead. Maomao crossed her legs arrogantly and assumed a look of irritation. She carefully examined the tea he handed to her, sniffing at it to see if he had spiked it with poison.

“Niangniang, that’s bad manners.” Tianyu exaggeratedly said, “You can’t do that.”

“I’m only acting in a way the other party deserves,” Maomao declared. Tianyu was aslo assuming a rather affable attitude before Jinshi. Like Maomao, he was drawing a line– ”Before this guy, he would forgive this much.”

“Before we move on to the topic at hand, there’s something I want to say to Maomao.” Jinshi assumed a solemn expression.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Calm down first.”

“I’m calm.”

“Don’t panic.”

“I’m not panicking.”

“Be sane.”

“I’m sane.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

He’s being kinda indirect, Maomao thought. What on earth could it be about?

Jinshi took out a paulownia box. He removed the lid to reveal a dirty, tattered book.

“What’s this?”

There was nothing on the cover. The book looked like it was merely bound with string.

“It’s Kada’s book,” he said.

“Ka…da…?” Maomao paused for a moment, then squealed. “FWOOOOOOOOH!”

“She’s not calm, huuuh,” Tianyu said.

Maomao immediately tried to leaf through the tattered book, and Jinshi slapped her hand away.

“Wh-why…”

“It’s this tattered. It’ll rip if you suddenly touch it. We should get it repaired first.”

“Okay, please repair it soon.” Maomao straightened her back. “By the way, how did you get your hand on such a valuable book?”

“Maomao should have your suspicions, right? Why would Tianyu be next to you?”

“Okay, let’s chase him out right now.”

Firstly, there was no reason for Tianyu to be here.

“You’re really mean?” Tianyu pouted.

“Tianyu’s family had this book in their possession.”

“WHAT?!” Maomao looked at Tianyu. She’d rather he didn’t scratch his head shyly. “Why?”

“Yeah, well, you know, it’s amazingly fortuitous.”

Jinsh set down the broken jade plaque. It was what Maomao had gotten from Joka and had left it in Jinshi’s custody. But the problem was that there were two of those jade plaques.

“Why do you have two?”

Moreover, if you join up the two pieces together, they precisely make one whole plaque.

“This jade plaque originally belonged to an imperial from a collateral line. However, he provoked the wrath of the emperor of the time and was executed. Tianyu and the person who entrusted the jade plaque to you, are the descendants of that imperial.”

“What?!” It came without warning, so Maomao clutched her head.

“This jade plaque you see originally belonged to my grandfather. My father’s older brother, my uncle that is, broke it into two and took one part of it away with him. This was probably thirty years ago.”

It matches Joka-neechan’s age.

It was Tianyu’s uncle who came as a patron. In other words, Tianyu and Joka were cousins.

“How on earth does this relate to Kada’s book?”

“The executed imperial was an outstanding court physician who was once called Kada. The reason the court physician was executed was because he performed an autopsy on the body of the imperial prince the emperor of the time had doted on.”

“…”

Like ancestor, like descendant.

Maomao understood it very well.

“When I looked into the jade plaque Maomao had requested me of, there was Kada’s name. And once again, I followed his movements from when he was alive.”

Kada had practised dissections by dismantling livestock and animals like Maomao and her peers did.

To put it bluntly, it was then he became acquainted with the hunter’s daughter.

Those called bigshots were a pain. It was a major incident if illegitimate children were discovered, but it was also the same if they were undiscovered. Since, as proof of that, a strangely impressive thing was left in the care of the woman, there happened to be a strange case of impersonation.

What the Kada person passed over, was the jade plaque.

“Then, the reason they defaced the jade plaque was…”

“So they can’t be exposed as the child of the executed imperial.”

If he had a wife and child, they would have been executed with him. If not, it would become a serious crime. An illegitimate child’s life would be even lighter.

“Should’ve just gotten rid of it.”

“Being that pragmatic isn’t easy,” Jinshi said, his tone strangely heavy with meaning. “And so, would it be better to inform the owner of the plaque that had been entrusted to Maomao?”

“No. The original owner would be fine if her safety is guaranteed. She has absolutely no interest in knowing who her father was.”

She could see Joka-neechan curtly refusing.

“Got it. I would also prefer it that way.” Even Jinshi would only find it a bother if the number of illegitimate children of former imperials increased. It was preferable to treat it as they didn’t exist.

Then, Joka-neechan’s problem was resolved. However, the next problem arose.

“By the way, Moon Prince. How will you punish the Tianyu person who is beside me?”

“WHY?!” Tianyu retorted.

Jinshi smiled wryly. “Isn’t that odd?”

“It’s not. There is a possibility that Court Physician Tianyu will also cause some kind of problem like his ancestor did. Shouldn’t we deal with him as a precaution?” Maomao said quickly.

“Maomao, I didn’t summon Tianyu here to punish him today.”

“Yes, yes.”

“When I obtained Kada’s book, I had spoken with Tianyu’s father. Kada’s book is the records of one court physician, but there is something curious in its contents.”

Maomao’s ears twitched.

“In Kada’s time, the imperial prince the emperor favoured had died young. What if he had summarised his studies of that disease in this book?”

“…That is interesting.”

“I don’t know when Kada’s book was placed in their care, but there is a high chance of that being written in it.”

In other words, if he had drawn anatomical drawings, it would be useful for Tianyu who’s well-versed in dissections.

Maomao found it vexing, but Tianyu’s skill in autopsy had Court Physician Liu’s seal of approval as well.

“Aside from that, it seems smallpox was prevalent at the time. The chance of that being written down is also high.”

What’s important to the court physicians were case studies and records of tried treatment methods. The number of attempts, failures, to get closer to the right answer would become the treatment policy from now on.

“And so, once the book has been repaired, I will leave it in the hands of the court physicians. Will you work with me?”

“Certainly.” Maomao and Tianyu bowed their heads.

The two withdrew from the room, and were about to return to the medical office, when…

“What’s wrong, Niangniang?”

“I forgot something.”

“Hmmph.”

She thought Tianyu would pry more, but surprisingly, he backed down with no resistance.

Maomao entered Jinshi’s room again.

“What’s wrong?” Jinshi continued his own work. In the vicinity, she could only see Baryou who was behind the partition. There was a military official as a bodyguard, but it wasn’t Basen, but someone whose name she didn’t know that Jinshi trusted.

It was a relief that Hulang wasn’t around.

“No.” Maomao examined Jinshi’s countenance.

She was strangely bothered by it. Speaking of what…

“Jinshi-sama, I have a question.”

“What is it?”

Jinshi noticed that Maomao was paying attention to her surroundings. He glanced around to check if there was anyone he had to chase out.

“Was the disease of the imperial prince who died young due to consanguinity?”

“…” Jinshi’s hand froze. “Why do you think so?”

“They’re both diseases, but epidemics would be the focus of the people engaging in politics. It bothered me how you emphasised the disease of an imperial prince who died young, over smallpox.”

Jinshi put down his brush, put his hands together, and rested his chin on it. “…I don’t know if it’s from consanguinity. However, what you’re imagining isn’t off the mark.”

“Is it Jinshi-sama?”

He denied it.

“An imperial prince?”

Another denial.

Maomao let out a deep sigh.

The disease that once afflicted the imperial family. And if it wasn’t Jinshi or the imperial princes, then…

“Has a similar case emerged?”

She won’t say who. It goes without saying that she was referring to his imperial majesty.

2. Pox

All Maomao could think about, even after returning from Jinshi’s office, was Kada’s book.

What could be written in it?

What disease ailed the imperial prince who died young?

Is his imperial majesty unwell?

Such thoughts occupied her as she worked, until a near dropping of a jar of medicine jolted her to attention. She needed to focus.

“What are you thinking about?”

Yo, her junior, came up to ask. She was the taller one of the court ladies, here to study medicine storage methods and dispensing from Maomao. Yo had a good memory, so Maomao found her a joy to teach.

“Excuse me. I’ll focus.”

Maomao clapped her cheeks in an attempt to motivate herself.

Not like that was going to help her get her mind off it. Her eyes snagged onto Yo’s long sleeves. “Is it all right if I ask you a rude question?”

“What is it?”

“Can you show me your pox scars?”

For a moment, Yo looked perplexed, but she then rolled up her sleeves. Red specks dotted her arm.

“Is it unusual?” she asked.

“No. I just never looked at it this closely.” Maomao had customers at her pharmacy with these scars too, but none who would be happy to show them to her. “Is it only on your arm?”

“I have some on my back and neck. Other people have it worse, though.”

“Is it because of Kokuyou’s treatment?”

“Yes,” Yo declared.

Kokuyou, an extremely cheerful doctor with prominent pockmarks on his face. He was said to have been a doctor at Yo's village in the past. An irresponsible man, but deeply trusted by Yo.

"What did he do specifically?" Maomao vaguely remembered asking about it before, but she wanted to double-check.

"He made a scrape on my skin and rubbed powdered scab on it. I think there's also a method where you inhale the powder, but he didn't have enough."

"I see."

Good thing I asked, Maomao nodded.

"How bad were your symptoms from that treatment?"

Yo crossed her arms and closed her eyes. "Umm, I developed a pretty high fever, but I didn't get blisters all over. Other children, who got the same treatment as I did, had the same severity as mine, or milder. There was also one whose fever subsided after a few days and they didn't get that many blisters either."

"So there is a wide range of differences." Maomao looked around for a notebook to record it down. Yo told her that she needn't do that, Maomao wanted to keep it in her memory.

"There is, quite a bit."

"What happened to the people who didn't get Kokuyou's treatment then?"

"My dad had caught the pox before, but he had a mild fever. Villagers with money to spare had left the village before the disease was widespread. My family and a couple of children are what's left of the villagers. Ah, there were also two adults who survived. Everyone else died."

Looks like people who caught the pox before weren't necessarily immune to it.

"What a terrible situation. How did you deal with the bodies?"

"We burned them, then buried the bones. We also burned the houses down."

Since the disease could be transmitted through the scabs, it would mean that there was a risk to simply burying the bodies. It would require people to steel their resolve since it could be taken as desecration of the dead.

“And so, is everyone in the capital?”

“No, aside from my family, the surviving adults moved elsewhere. Also, we made sure to boil our clothes and things and were fully recovered from the disease before we came to the capital.” It seems she wanted to highlight that her family didn’t bring the epidemic with them.

Maomao needed to ask Kokuyou again for the pox treatment.

Let’s ask Dad too.

There were also many other outstanding people among the court physicians. The older ones might know about pox epidemics of the past.

Work came to an end while they were chatting.

“Now then. Come with me with the medicine we’ve made,” Maomao said.

“Okay,” Yo replied.

Frequently used medicine was stored at the medical office.

“We have a lot of overbearing people, but don’t say anything and don’t get fussed about what they say. Follow me.”

Given that they were close to the military officer’s training grounds, there were a lot of rugged men. She mightn’t be refined yet, but she won’t be able to stand it if they made a move on her cute junior.

As they walked past, the young men appraised Maomao’s group. Maomao was being her usual self, but Yo was walking a little stiffly.

“Come on now, this is nothing. Go away.”

They reached the medical office to see the old court physician chase away a military officer who had a minor graze injury. Despite looking like a nice old man, the experienced court physician was a veteran of fighting scenes.

“Wouldn’t a light application of medicine give him a peace of mind?” asked Court Physician Ri, an old friend who was building muscle.

“I cleaned the wound. More importantly, that guy was the one who was smiling foolishly when their colleague came in with a broken arm last time.”

“Is that so? What a sissy.”

Maomao had a feeling that Court Physician Ri’s muscles were slowly eroding his brain.

“Restocking medicine,” she entered the medical office and took out the box of medicine.

“Restocking.” Yo copied Maomao.

The old court physician and Court Physician Ri were relatively polite to girls, so Maomao could rest easy with Yo here. To say it conversely, Maomao was keenly aware that this point was taken into account when she was assigned here.

“When you’re restocking, check the dates on the medicine that’s leftover. Put the older ones on top and throw away whatever is too old.”

She restocked often so medicine was rarely thrown out. Unlike the medical office in the inner palace, this was a proper workplace.

I wonder if Dad and quack doctor are good.

With her dad around, the inner palace medical office had to be in good hands now. If there was anything to worry about, it would be the quack doctor’s head.

There were no injured people, so they were here at a good time. Maomao could raise her question right now.

“Have you court physicians caught the pox before?”

Yao looked a little surprised, but she restocked the medicine without pause.

“The pox? Hasn’t everyone caught it?” Court Physician Ri asked.

“No, she’s probably talking about the other pox,” the old court physician said.

Court Physician Ri was probably talking about chickenpox instead of smallpox. If it was chickenpox, people would have caught it as children. Maomao didn’t know the difference too well, just that smallpox was deadlier.

“I have.” The old court physician rolled up his sleeves to show them. There were red specks alongside spots on his skin. It was much denser than Yo’s.

He could show them openly since he had caught the disease in the past and that there were only people here who understood that it wasn’t contagious even if there were still scars.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“No. I know it’s not infectious.”

“Saves me the trouble of explaining. Good.”

The old court physician was relieved by Yo’s attitude. Any court lady who would recoil at the sight of it were long chased out by Yao.

“From what I can tell from the scars, was it bad?”

“It was. The scars cover half of my back. Not unusual in my generation, mind you. It was widespread at the time. But, my first wife had expressed her unwillingness.”

“What about your second wife?”

“She’s a good woman. She’s at home looking after our great-grandchild.” The court physician grinned and rolled down his sleeves. “I thought it was chickenpox at first, but the symptoms worsened. I could’ve died if I wasn’t from a family of doctors.”

“I don’t know the difference between chickenpox and smallpox,” Court Physician Ri said.

Maomao nodded as well.

“The fatality rates are different, but they look similar. Although, I’ve heard a hypothesis where the toxins that give rise to the diseases are similar yet different.”

Court Physician Ri took break-time snacks out from a drawer to eat. He offered some to Maomao’s group, so they thankfully helped themselves.

“The toxins that give rise to the diseases, huh.”

“Maomao, don’t even think about trying.”

“…I know.” Maomao averted her eyes from Court Physician Ri’s glare.

They have progressed into a break. Maomao left the rest of the medicine restocking to Yo and prepared tea.

“A lot can be said about the pox scars, but it comes with a number of advantages when you become a doctor. Since you’ve experienced the disease firsthand, you know the terrors of it, and it becomes difficult for you to catch it again.”

“Yes.”

Instead of Maomao, it was Yo who answered. She might have found solace, in a sense, through the old court physician’s existence.

Good thing I brought it up in front of Yo.

At the very least, she could see that these people weren’t one to take smallpox lightly. Even Maomao wasn’t going to bring it up in front of people who would make fun of the pockmarks.

“With that being said, it works against you when you rise in position. Take two court physicians with the same ability. The one to treat a high and noble person would be the one with the least scars.”

“…”

Court Physician Liu was currently the one in charge of the court physicians. He was amazing, but considering age, it wouldn’t be odd if the old court physician had a higher position.

Awkwardness fell over Maomao's group.

"Oh well. Liu-chan is smart and more accomplished than I, so it's fine. I'd be much too awed to be his imperial majesty's attending physician."

"His imperial majesty's attending physician. You'll need more than enough guts to stomach it."

His imperial majesty's attending physician.

Jinshi's profound words came to mind.

Is it something I can't find out about?

That being said, it was Court Physician Liu they were talking about. Would Maomao be getting in the way if she were to poke her nose into it? She groaned as she took a sip of the tea she brewed.

3. Specialised Training

The opportunity presented itself surprisingly quickly.

“Heeey, Maomao.”

The old court physician called for her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Can I have you transfer to a different section for a little while?”

“Understood. Where will I be going?”

“Court Physician Liu’s section.”

Court Physician Liu!

This was the best news she’d ever heard. Court Physician Liu was the emperor’s attending physician. She might even be able to look into the emperor’s current condition.

But why would Court Physician Liu’s section be short-staffed?

“I was sure his section would have other capable court physicians though.”

“I was told you’d be there for odd jobs. Maybe they want you for medicine stocktaking?”

“Really?”

Actually really?

Although Maomao wasn’t convinced, she decided to obey without question.

Court Physician Liu’s medical office was right in the heart of the imperial court. Although it was located in the outer court, it was near the emperor’s bedchambers. In other words, it was also near the imperial harem—the inner palace. So with the person who was nearby, but one she least expected to see, right before her eyes, Maomao’s jaws dropped in surprise.

“Dad.”

“Not *Dad*. Here, you would call me, let’s see, Court Physician Kan.”

It was Luomen. She was sure her adoptive father was currently working in the inner palace.

“Liu-san called me here with a *you’d be able to make medicine at least, right?*”

“Isn’t that what you’re good at? You haven’t done surgery in a long time so I wouldn’t rely on you for that. Not to say that your skill in that has deteriorated, mind you.”

Court Physician Liu and Luomen were old friends.

“Surgery, huh. Better I don’t, since I can’t stand for long.” Luomen slapped his knee.

“You’re the best person to take care of this guy, right?”

Going by Court Physician Liu’s words, Maomao knew why she was called here. Luomen was missing a kneecap, so he had trouble walking. Looks like he wanted her here to be his assistant.

“Luomen, you will be coming here for the time being,” was all Court Physician Liu said before he left with a wave of his hand, leaving his old friend to take care of the rest.

“Dad.”

“Wrong.”

“Court Physician Kan.” Maomao corrected herself.

“What is it?” Luomen headed for the medicine storage, supported by his cane. The other court physicians followed.

“What is Court Physician Liu’s intention in gathering people here?” Maomao asked her dad politely.

“It’s a customary thing since long ago. Once court physicians become experienced, they split off to specialise in their area of expertise. While it’s good to have a lot of court physicians who can do everything, specialisations are much better for efficiency.”

“Is that so?” Maomao couldn’t delve further into what she didn’t understand.

The storage was filled with rows of medicine shelves. It was a place Maomao visited once a day, but no matter when and how many times she did, it was calming.

“What do you want us to do?” one of the court physicians asked.

“Let’s see. Sorry, but can I have you make me a few kinds of medicines?”

“Understood.”

There were three court physicians aside from Maomao. Two were middle-ranking and the other was Tianyu’s classmate.

They were hardworking and made no complaints about Maomao being involved in the management of medicine. Rather than meek personalities, it was more that they have similar vibes to Maomao.

As always, Maomao didn’t remember their names.

Tall senior. Short senior. Middle classmate.

The tall middle-ranking court physician. The short middle-ranking court physician. The medium-ish court physician who was her peer.

These were people who happened to enjoy working in silence, reviewing the effectiveness of medicine and researching ways to increase the efficacy of medicine. In other words, they were fine with anyone as long as no one got in their way.

“The patient is a twenty year old woman. According to a consultation through her husband, she is suffering from insomnia, possibly due to gastritis. What would you prescribe her?”

The middle classmate was the first to move. He opened a couple of medicine boxes and gathered the ingredients required for his medicine.

Longan, angelica root, liquorice, gardenia fruit… that’d be the Augmented Restore the Spleen Decoction?

Maomao confirmed the herbal medicines he placed on the table with a sidelong glance.

“Why aren’t the rest of you getting to work?” Luomen asked.

“Does she have any other symptoms?” The short senior squinted his eyes.

“Symptoms, huh.”

“Does she have morning sickness?” Maomao asked just in case.

A twenty year old woman; a consultation via her husband. Because of that, you’d have to consider pregnancy as a possibility. There are a lot of medicines for insomnia, but a lot also have adverse effects for pregnancy.

The two middle-ranking court physicians also alluded to the same possibility as Maomao did.

“Let’s see. She is also suffering from nausea, so it’s better to bear that possibility in mind.”

The three of them started to move. They all reached for the same herbs, and made the same medicine. Their methods had some slight differences, but the end product was pretty much the same.

“Yes, you three are correct. As for this one, there are some issues.”

As expected, only the middle classmate’s attempt didn’t make the cut. He was disappointed, but he confirmed the part that went wrong, and accepted the evaluation.

“Let’s move onto the next task.”

Luomen then had Maomao’s group make several kinds of medicine.

He wasn’t the type to hand out a book of prescriptions and just have them make medicine. There was always more to it.

There’s usually a trick question.

You could say it was mean, but there were many cases where patients were unable to describe their own symptoms properly. It was appropriate to take what others say with a pinch of salt—that was Luomen’s teaching.

I’d rather he be as careful as this even when it comes to money.

He was employed as a court physician, so she didn’t think he would get a pay cut, but let’s double check that for next time.

There’s a chance of him giving away his entire riches to a needy person who passes by.

She wanted to believe that it would be fine if he didn’t take a single step out of the imperial court.

This repeated for the next few days.

Luomen reviewed their medicinal knowledge and observed their work progress.

“For the next task, how about making a large batch within the time limit? I’ll have you put together what’s written here.”

Luomen raised the level of difficulty.

Maomao checked the prescription. “A question.” She raised her hand.

“What is it?”

“I think making any more of this medicine will be a waste. We won’t be able to use it up.”

“I think so too.”

“What about the ointment that’s commonly used by military officers?”

The other court physicians agreed with Maomao.

“It won’t be a waste. We’ll be distributing the medicine you make to patients in town.”

“…What do you mean by that?” the middle classmate asked.

“It will be to study the effects of the new medicine. We’ve assembled patients with similar symptoms so we can easily compare them.”

The patients must have been gathered for a more accurate result to the experiments that Maomao had used her left arm for.

“…” Maomao reviewed the prescription one more time. Winter melon seed. Rhubarb. Peony root bark.

Cardiovascular drugs?

What kind of patients have they assembled?

Would it be wrong to assume that they had gathered patients suffering the same symptoms as the emperor?

Maomao, finding it suspicious, began to collect the herbal medicines noted down on the prescription.

4. Clinical

Maomao devoted herself to making medicine day after day.

Grind, grind, grind, griiiind.

Her hands were going to get calluses from using the druggist's mortar. A lot of the medicines they had been tasked to make used roughly the same herbs but with altered compositions.

Antipyics, drugs that improve blood flow, anti-inflammatories.

"What are they having us make?" the medium-ish height court physician classmate asked. He wasn't much older than Maomao—a few years above twenty.

"The Rhubarb and Moutan Decoction, with some changes, I guess," the tall senior said.

A medicine that improves blood circulation.

The three court physicians and Maomao were gathered here today. Their teacher, Luomen, will come later after stopping by the medical office in the inner palace.

"What else is there?"

The middle classmate asked questions actively since he had the least knowledge of them all.

"Liquorice and peony. That'd be the Peony and Liquorice Decoction," the tall senior replied. The taller one actively answered questions, whereas the shorter one would only comment when his interest was piqued.

"Looks like it," Maomao agreed. "It's a medicine to relieve muscle cramping, right?"

"It's also good for lower back and abdominal pains."

"Also when you have to look for a specific place when your belly aches," the short senior added.

Maomao had a thought.

I thought it was circulatory, but what if it's digestive?

The Rhubarb and Moutan Decoction was also used for constipation and abdominal pain. The drug was also used for irregular periods, so it was commonly prescribed to women.

What's the disease?

I'll figure it out once I see the patients who will be taking the medicine, Maomao thought.

And Luomen wasn't the type to not let his students learn to think for themselves.

Luomen, who arrived later, had arranged for a carriage.

"We'll be delivering the medicine now. Everyone, come with me."

The carriage ride took a quarter of a dual hour. They arrived at an estate in the outskirts of the capital. She called it an estate, but it was just a simple large-sized dwelling, nothing flashy.

Though they were in the residential district, a lot of trees surrounded the house, which blocked the view of the interior.

"Carry the supplies for me."

At Luomen's voice, the three court physicians lifted up the baggage. It didn't seem like they needed Maomao's help, so she went to stand beside Luomen to support him as they walked over.

There were a dozen or so men inside the building, their ages ranging from teens to forties. The large room was partitioned into sections, each furnished with a bed. Perhaps the nursing was scrupulous, as both the beds and sleepwear looked clean.

They have a sickly complexion. There are buckets beside the beds. For vomiting use?

Occupations were varied. Would those with rough hands and feet be farmers? Those with finger calluses might be scribes.

As these people were here to participate in a drug experiment, there wouldn't be anyone considered wealthy here.

The people wearing white aprons who were walking around, could they be healthcare workers?

"We've brought the medicine," Luomen said to a man wearing a white apron.

"Thank you very much."

"Since we're already here, can we check the inventory and restock as well?"

“Yes. Please do.”

Maomao’s group was led to the medicine storage area. It was near the kitchen, furnished with two new medicine shelves.

“Once you’re done sorting, can you hand me the medicine?” Luomen asked.

“Yes.”

Luomen quickly restocked the shelves. The medicine was already individually packed, each one a singular dose.

I’ve nothing to do.

As the three court physicians didn’t foist odd jobs onto Maomao, she found herself with time to spare. Since she had nothing to do, she studied her surroundings.

The estate, originally a private house, had been converted into a makeshift medical office. There were familiar tools, like mortars, grinders, flour sifters and dispensing spoons.

Do they make medicine here too?

But, Maomao sniffed the air. There’s not much of a medicine smell. It’s a sweet scent.

Maomao sniffed around and lowered herself onto the ground. She lifted the lid of the pot on the stove—it contained honey of a darkish hue.

Honey with its moisture content removed—in other words, honey concentrate, which is used to make pills. Used to make pills, but she couldn’t find the essential herbal medicines that went into the making of pills.

Instead, she found wheat flour and buckwheat flour—normal flour.

“Buckwheat flour…” Maomao distanced herself and covered her mouth with a towel.

“Maomao dear, don’t touch things without permission. Come back here,” Luomen said.

“Okay.”

A lot of other things were weird too.

There were two medicine shelves, but they were arranged in exactly the same way. The medicines were labelled, but both shelves had the same drawers labelled with the same name.

Why did they purposely split it into two?

Maomao found it suspicious.

Then the man with the white apron showed up in the kitchen. “It’s nearly time to administer the medicine.”

“Is that so?” Luomen moved away from the medicine shelf and the man took five packs of the medicine they just restocked. Then he took yet another five of the same medicine from the drawer of the other shelf.

Maomao wasn't the only one who found his actions strange.

"Court Physician Kan." The tall senior raised his hand. "May I check the contents of the other medicine shelf?"

"Sure."

With Luomen's permission, the tall senior took out a pack of medicine from the other medicine box and opened it. Maomao and the other court physicians also peered into it.

"Maomao dear, you should look from a distance," Luomen said.

Maomao stood on guard.

The pills in the pack were dark brown. Upon closer look, she could see black grains among it.

"…Could it be, buckwheat flour?" she asked.

"That should also be part of its composition."

There were medicinal pills formed from a combination of wheat flour, buckwheat flour and dye made to resemble herbal medicine. No, there wasn't anything medicinal about it.

"Why would they put fake medicine with no effect on the shelves here?" the middle classmate said angrily.

"You're too loud," Luomen said.

"Why would they do such a thing?"

"Why? Use your head."

When told to use his head, that was the only thing he could do.

Luomen only asked questions that could be answered with some thinking. If you couldn't think up an answer, it would just mean that you had overlooked something.

Just now, he took five packs each. Seeing how there are ten patients, it would mean half-half.

When patients come here to get medical treatment, they get treated well. They would be provided with good food too.

He's determining the effects of the medicine under the same conditions.

It might seem like they could be improving from the clean environment and nutritious food instead of from the medicine. It'd be troubling if so.

Which was why they needed to arrange for a two-group study.

"Maomao dear, do you know?" Luomen asked.

"Yes," Maomao replied.

"Your thoughts?"

"I think you have divided them into two groups to study if the medicine's effect is not actually due to changes in environment and food. It is to determine if there are differences from the presence or absence of medicine among the people with the same symptoms under the same conditions."

Luomen smiled, but he didn't agree.

"Also, the reason you purposely prepared for medicine and fake medicine would be—"

"Okay, stop right there. There's another child who wants to answer, so how about we give him a turn?"

Maomao, not quite understanding, looked to her side.

The short senior had a confident expression. "Not only food, clothes and shelter, it is to make their state of mind identical as well. In the same way, illnesses could be from the mind, it is possible that, conversely, medicine could be from the mind as well."

"Correct. The body can work in mysterious ways when tricked into believing that it has taken medicine. These pills are to satisfy that condition."

Luomen picked up the buckwheat flour pills.

How meticulous of them to go out of their way to make it in a similar colour as well.

"I think, in addition to producing medicine as usual, I will have you all come here to keep records of the patients' conditions as well, okay?" he said and returned the pills to the medicine shelf.

5. Record

As per Luomen's instructions, Maomao's group will take trips to the clinic in town. With that being said, having all four of them stick together day in day out would be unproductive. There were already nurses to take care of the patients and it was also more efficient to make medicine in the imperial court's medical office.

"How about alternating in pairs? We can have one pair at the clinic to keep records and nurse the patients, while we have the other pair at the imperial court to make medicine as usual?"

The tall senior was the one who settled it. He was a great help at a time like this.

"Then, we'll start with Maomao and I."

Maomao will be working alongside the short senior first. They decided to have the seniors pair up with the juniors, then switch over every so often.

"Best regards," the short senior said.

"I look forward to working with you," Maomao said.

The short senior was less talkative than the tall senior, but she could tell he was capable just by looking at him. He was over thirty years of age, probably more knowledgeable than the tall senior who was from the same age group. The way he made medicine was conscientious and flawless as well. Seeing how he had nimble fingers, he was probably also good at surgery.

Surgery looks to be right for him, and yet.

Maomao wondered if he was like her. Does he like medicine so much that he was acting as a herbalist?

His ordinary face and short stature reminded her of a certain abacus glasses guy, but this here was a respectable adult.

"Shall we head off?" he asked.

"Yes."

When they travelled from the imperial court, they arranged for a carriage since they had supplies with them. Although it was within walking distance, they had to cut through the shopping district, which meant that they could run into quite some pickpockets. Unlike military officers, well-dressed civil officials on the streets tend to be easy marks.

The moment they arrived at the clinic, they restocked the shelves with the medicine they brought with them.

“Will we be checking up on the patients right away?” Maomao prepared a length of string to get her sleeves out of the way. She tied her sleeves back for ease of movement.

“No, how about we check the records before we go about with that?” the short senior said, picking up the notebook that contained the records.

Maomao peered over. They must have opted to use paper instead of wooden slips due to the sheer amount of information they needed to record. However, the paper was fluffy, probably due to its low quality.

You can get it for cheeeap from the quack doctor.

There were no names on record, but the patients’ ages, physiques, occupations and so on were listed in detail.

“They had quite a lot at the start,” Maomao said.

It seems the medicine trials began around a month ago. There had been thirty patients. Now, there were only a third of that number left. I was wondering why there were so few people with how big the clinic was, so that’s why, Maomao thought.

“It doesn’t look like there were any liars,” the short senior said.

“So it seems.”

The trials may be for the development of medicine, but patients were promised medical treatment and daily necessities for free. There would be people who’d lie about having the disease during recruitment.

“Also, people who couldn’t handle the medicine also left,” he said.

“Yes.”

When Maomao and the short senior saw the patients’ symptoms, they pretty much identified what disease they had. Abdominal pains came in many forms, but they could judge what it was from their conditions.

“What disease do you think it is?” he asked.

“…Appendicitis, maybe.”

“I think so too.”

The disease wasn't clearly spelled out in the notebook. They also had to remember that the study merely gathered patients with similar clinical characteristics, so they weren't necessarily limited to that particular disease.

"Appendicitis." Maomao had prescribed medicine for it many times. A lot of the medicines then were the same as what was currently being given to the patients in the clinic.

Appendicitis, huuuh.

Maomao groaned.

As its name suggests, it is an inflammation of the part known as the appendix. The use of medicine to relieve symptoms is ultimately symptomatic therapy. Reportedly, some people with mild symptoms do recover, but the worsening of the symptoms means that the inflamed section has festered, and its poison spread throughout the body. The moment that happens, there would be complications with a high fatality rate. She heard that over half of the patients die once it reaches that stage.

Appendicitis. She recalled the Kada book that Jinshi had brought over.

Appendicitis, huh.

Jinshi had suspicions about whether the emperor's disease was due to consanguinity. Maomao didn't think so.

Consanguineous marriages were common up until the end of the era of the emperor before the last. The previous emperor had the Empress Regnant, who was from a family of low social standing, so she hadn't been a blood relative. The current emperor's mother, Anshi, wasn't from the imperial family either.

Rather than the same disease as from Kada's era due to descent, she reckoned it was the same disease by chance. Appendicitis wasn't that unusual of a disease.

Can't they restore that book faster?

Looks like it will take time.

Apart from waiting for Kada's book, she had to do her work.

"It doesn't matter what the disease is. Let's get to work."

"Yes." Maomao followed the short senior's words.

First, they checked everything. They went around giving the patients simple check-ups.

There were two rooms. Each one contained five people, but it didn't mean that they were separated into the medicine group and the fake medicine group.

It'd be weird if they did it like that.

When administering medicine, they had to make sure the patients were given the correct medicine.

There were three meals a day. The dishes were good for digestion, such as congee. The ingredients in the soups were also minced and boiled until they broke down. While it didn't seem like enough food, it also considered nutrition—the meat and bone were extracted into the broth.

Even if it wasn't appendicitis if there was something wrong with the digestive system, food that was easy to digest was key.

Maomao organised the information while checking the record.

They then moved to the kitchen area to get out of the patients' earshot.

"As expected, the patients in the medicated group are more stable," she said.

"There are even patients in the unmedicated group whose inflammation has subsided, but there aren't many," he said.

"Could it be those with energy?"

This type of experiment would be more accurate with a greater number of people. Since they were putting people's bodies to the test, there would be individual differences—numbers will bring out a value closer to the average.

If Rahan were here, he would've taken the initiative to do so.

Nonetheless, there was no way she could call on him.

Right now, Maomao was only arbitrarily suspecting that the emperor was unwell. In reality, she was simply told that there was a medicine trial, nothing else.

If the emperor were unwell, it would be top-secret information. Jinshi had told Maomao and Tianyu about Kada's book. He never said that the emperor was in poor physical health. He just didn't confirm or deny Maomao's words.

Since Maomao didn't have anyone she could ask, she thought about looking into Court Physician Liu's circumstances.

The emperor in poor physical health—that alone would spell political unrest.

“Court Physician,” Maomao called for the short senior who was writing something.

“What is it?”

“In the case of appendicitis, how can you treat it if medicine doesn’t work?”

Unfortunately, Maomao was never taught how to treat it.

“There’s surgery, I guess. You’d remove the pus that accumulated in the abdomen.”

“Would that get to the root of the problem?”

“I can’t see why it wouldn’t.” The short senior spoke as though the problem didn’t concern him.

“Have you attempted that operation before?”

“I haven’t. Probably won’t be able to.” The short senior awkwardly scratched the back of his neck with the handle of his brush.

“Why not? You look like you’d be good at it.”

He looked like he had the manual dexterity for it. His writing was neat as well, although she had no idea if that was relevant.

“…I can’t,” he said.

“You can’t?” she asked.

“I can’t handle blood…”

“I see.” Maomao understood his feelings all too well.

6. Anaesthetic

While she worked, she would chat a little with her colleagues.

The short senior was from a family that had been in the medical field for generations, so whether he liked it or not, he had to take the court physician exam.

“It was truly hell,” he said.

Having the talent but not the aptitude made it difficult.

“My condolences.” That was all Maomao could say.

The two of them divided their roles in the clinic that had become the site for the medicine trials.

The short senior couldn’t handle blood and Maomao couldn’t handle buckwheat, so they covered the other’s weaknesses. As this form of medical treatment was done through internal medicine, they rarely encountered blood, but when there was a patient who had fallen over on his way to the toilet and split his brow, Maomao was the one who treated him.

In return, the short senior was left in charge of making the fake medicine.

The short senior looked reliable at first glance, but once she found his weakness, she found a strange sense of kinship.

When her first day of working at the clinic came to an end, Maomao returned to the dorms. Chue was standing in wait at the front of the building.

“Greetings, Maomao-san.”

“Greetings, Chue-san.”

Maomao knew why Chue was here. She headed over to where the other woman was beckoning from. As expected, there was a carriage parked there–she hopped on.

Maomao was brought to an archive. The building wasn’t particularly far from Jinshi’s office, but structurally it wasn’t as large.

“Excuse meee.”

Maomao followed Chue into a room that was pleasant with its characteristic dampness and heavy with the smell of paper.

There weren’t many people around. There was one person at the entrance and another working at the back. As for what they were doing, they were immersing paper into something that looked like water and peeling off the pages that were stuck together.

“They’re in the middle of the restoration. Don’t disturb them.”

She heard a voice behind her, which turned out to be Jinshi’s. Gaoshun was standing close behind him as his guard.

How unusual.

She heard that Gaoshun was now working directly under the emperor. Could he be here with Jinshi despite that due to some purpose?

That being said, Maomao was interested in something else.

“The restoration of the book is finished, right?” Maomao asked as her eyes shone.

“It’s still a work in progress.” Jinshi waved her over so she followed him.

There were sheets of paper all laid out. It was tattered and the text had some blotting. There was also an illustration of what looks to be a human body.

“…Ohh.” Maomao’s eyes widened.

There was stuff about diseases, injuries and medicine written in it, but the largest was the illustration of a dissection. The inside of a human was drawn in detail.

They say he’s Tianyu’s ancestor, huh.

She could feel their kinship, strangely enough.

“…”

“…”

“…”

“Say something,” Jinshi said to Maomao who was mesmerised by the book.

“Pardon me,” she said, while her eyes were glued to the restored book. “This is an interesting book.”

“It’s boring for me.”

“For the lack of morality, he made a huge mess of it, which allowed him to obtain an interesting result.”

“What does that make him as a person?” Jinshi interjected in his surprise.

Considering the era, would it be around a hundred years ago? The book had a record of the sliced-open belly of a living person.

“The patient was a slave?”

“In all likelihood.”

It was absolutely unthinkable to cut up a person’s belly. When the empress dowager gave birth to the current emperor, her belly was sliced open as a last resort.

Maomao checked that there were only Jinshi, Chue and Gaoshun in the room with her. She found that Chue was quiet, then noticed that Gaoshun had landed her a long piece of confectionery. It was just like Gaoshun to pick things that wouldn’t leave behind crumbs.

Seeing the lineup of people, Maomao wondered how much she could say. However, she recalled that she wasn’t in the position to say that she didn’t want to get involved in such matters now.

“How is his imperial majesty’s current state of health?” she asked.

“What do you think?” Jinshi said.

She got a question for an answer.

“…This is just my opinion.”

“That’s the predictable phrase.”

It can’t be helped that Maomao would think of replying with her own opinion. It was nothing more than speculation.

“…I presume that his imperial majesty could have appendicitis. The reason being, the court physicians of the imperial court are currently testing the effects of appendicitis medicine. Furthermore, I presume that this is a chronic condition.”

“Why do you think it’s chronic?”

“It takes time to test the effects of medicine. If it were acute appendicitis, we would have already run out of time. Otherwise, he could have developed appendicitis before, recovered from it and they’re looking into it since there is a risk of relapse.”

“The correct answer is the latter. His imperial majesty had suffered from appendicitis once before. He was cured through medicine then.”

“In that case, could the symptoms from that time be present now?”

“Allow me to explain that point. I had been his imperial majesty’s advisor at the time.” Gaoshun took a step forward.

His imperial majesty's advisor. That would be before Jinshi entered the inner palace, huh.

Which means, before he succeeded the throne.

"At the time, his imperial majesty, who had been the crown prince, had symptoms of abdominal pain, nausea and fever. The chief court physician at the time had diagnosed him with appendicitis caused by mental stress and settled it with medicine and a change of diet."

There were many causes for appendicitis, so that might not necessarily be it. However, with the chief court physician having said such, could there be a clear source of strong mental stress?

"Do you know what was the source of his stress?"

"I can't give a definite say as to how much, but his imperial majesty, as the crown prince, had a lot of arguments, more so with the previous emperor's mother than his father."

"…"

That'd be stressful.

Maomao had never actually seen the previous empress dowager–the Empress Regnant–so she had no idea, but from anecdotes she'd heard, she knew that the woman hadn't been an ordinary person.

Word on the street was that the Empress Regnant had a lot of disputes with the current emperor, who had been the crown prince, in her final years.

"Also, I don't know what you will think of it after hearing this, Xiao-mao."

"What is it?"

"At the time, Rakan-dono was at his imperial majesty's side."

Maomao's jaws dropped. "Worthless piece of shit."

"Maomao-san. Your true feelings are spilling out."

Chue had finished eating her candy, so Gaoshun gave her another one. It seems their in-law relationship was good.

However, upon hearing it, she could accept it. The weirdo monocles had returned to the capital from the western capital seventeen, no, eighteen years ago. To promote from

that, he would require a major supporter. If there was a much younger crown prince who was standing off against the Empress Regnant, she could believe him strengthening his power from his support.

More importantly, it was suspicious why the man didn't get acquitted while doing however he pleased like blowing up the inner palace.

Did he get a hold of his imperial majesty's weakness?

It was plausible, strangely enough.

"Could the reason for his stress be that middle-aged monocle instead?" she asked.

"I'll refrain from giving my opinion." Gaoshun avoided answering.

"Then, his imperial majesty is currently suffering from the same symptoms from that time, right?"

"Yes. As far as his interviewing with Court Physician Liu and Court Physician Kan went, his condition is not yet bad."

Court Physician Kan–that would be her dad, Luomen.

"So there are yet signs of him recovering."

Gaoshun nodded.

If he was showing no signs of improvement from continuously taking medicine, they would have to operate on him.

Creating an injury on the imperial body, huh.

Even Maomao understood. Even if it was just a surgery, they had to be prepared for death. Even if it was successful, no one knows if anything would be said about it. They could be sentenced to death with some odd fault found against them.

Since the patient was a person of the heavens, the weight was much too different to the empress dowager's caesarian.

Maomao involuntarily scratched her head.

There was also Luomen, her adoptive father, but they must not have a remarkable court physician like Court Physician Liu punished due to some hopeless reason.

Could there be some groundbreaking cure in Kada's book? She had a feeling there might be something once they progress further with the restoration.

We can't take our sweet time waiting.

What Maomao could do was limited. But was there anything she could do?

"If anything happens to his imperial majesty, the country will spiral out of control."

Jinshi's mutterings were on point. The crown prince wasn't five years old yet. The one to become the regent would be Empress Gyokuyou's father, Gyoku'en.

There were a lot of subjects who hated the crown prince who possessed blood from the distant western lands. In that case, there were people considering Consort Rifa's imperial prince who was the same age. And more than that, if anyone was being brought up…

At twenty-two years of age, the emperor's younger brother, Jinshi.

It'll be a mess. An utter mess.

Even if Jinshi had no interest in the throne, everyone around him wouldn't shut up about it.

And Maomao, unlike in the past, couldn't relax either.

What is there, what is there, what is there?

If only a little, something that could be useful, when anything happens.

Maomao stared at the book again.

"Hey, Maomao."

Jinshi was calling out to her, but right now, she was looking to see if there were any straws to grasp.

And amidst that, she found some smudged characters.

"Ma…" Maomao squinted.

In an attempt to decipher the smudged characters, she used the power of imagination to read them out.

"Mafeisan."

She felt like that was what she read out. Maomao clenched her fist.

What seemed to be the ingredients were written down, but the characters were so smudged she could hardly read them. There were just a bunch of ingredients.

“What’s that?” Jinshi asked.

“I’ve only heard of the name. It’s a legendary anaesthetic created by the divine doctor.”

“…Can you make it?”

Jinshi seemed to understand what Maomao wanted to do.

“I don’t know. I can’t make out most of the ingredients and I don’t know what effect it has. But, I know one person who is well-informed about this.”

“Who?”

Maomao smiled.

The only ingredient she could read from the text was Devil’s Trumpet.

7. Lives on a Scale

Suirei—a blood relative of the Shi clan that was exterminated three years ago and the granddaughter of the previous emperor.

Due to the special circumstances of her birth and her past, her existence couldn't be made public, so she was currently in A'duo's custody.

Such a woman possessed medical knowledge. The resurrection medicine that puts people in a state of false death was created by her teacher and her.

The Devil's Trumpet, a deadly poison, was among its ingredients.

A'duo had stepped down from being a high-ranking consort and left the inner palace. She was currently residing in the villa in the capital, but Maomao had all sorts of opinions about it.

She may be living elsewhere, but how does it differ from living in the inner palace?

It was an opinion so she couldn't voice it.

The wheels of the carriage rattled as they entered the villa.

She could hear the voices of children. The surviving children of the Shi clan were living under A'duo's custody with Suirei.

Chou'u who made mischief in the pleasure district all the time was supposed to come here as well. But he lost his memory as a side effect of the resurrection medicine, so he was allowed a different path from the other children.

As long as they had memories of the Shi clan, the children were not allowed to come out in public.

It's going to be a veeeeery long time.

When you take lifespan into consideration, A'duo would die earlier. There were a couple of children—barring illness and injury, they wouldn't die earlier than A'Duo. Was there a person who could look after them until the end while protecting their secret?

Standing among those kids were two men. No, two women in men's clothing. It was A'duo and Suirei. Whether it be for ease of movement or their taste, the two often wore men's clothes.

“A’duo-sama, it has been a while.” Chue gave her greetings.

Maomao followed in bowing her head.

Their last meeting was the confession about A’duo and Jinshi’s relationship, so Maomao had mixed feelings about it.

“It hasn’t been that long, has it?” A’duo said while directing the attendants to take the children far away. The children were led away with looks of disappointment. “Shall we move elsewhere?”

“Yes.”

The subject of the conversation was something they wanted to keep a secret.

Maomao’s group was led to a room in the villa. There was a table with four chairs. An attendant prepared tea, and then left the room.

A’duo, Suirei, Maomao and Chue were the only people in the room. A’duo gestured for them to sit, so the three of them took their seats.

“Well then, I heard that you have business with Sui. What is it about?” A’duo crossed her legs and asked Maomao.

“I wish to borrow Sui…’s medical skill.” Maomao, not sure about calling Suirei by her real name, opted to call her Sui as well.

“What do you think, Sui?” A’duo asked.

“I have no opinion. I will follow A’duo-sama’s orders,” Suirei said.

“How boring.” A’duo picked up a smoking pipe and turned it in her hands. It appears she wasn’t smoking from it; she was just spinning it around. She reminded Maomao of how Jinshi spun his brush.

“What do you want Sui to do, specifically?”

In response to A’duo, Maomao took out a thin wooden box she had brought with her. She took off the lid, revealing a single sheet of paper. There was also charcoal to act as a desiccant and insect repellant.

“What is this?”

“Do you know of a drug known as mafeisan?”

“…I have heard of it once. A medicine that takes away pain–isn’t that a nursery tale?” Suirei said like she was picking her words carefully. She had her eyes on the restored piece of paper, silently reading.

“What would you do if that medicine existed?”

“…I would do nothing.”

“Even if I tell you that it contains Devil’s Trumpet?”

“Wouldn’t that make it a poison rather than medicine? What would you use it on?”

As Maomao and Suirei had their exchange, A’duo watched from the sidelines and Chue was itching to interrupt.

“It’s for surgery.”

Suirei nodded in understanding. “To take away the pain of surgery, you mean to stop the heart once?”

“Not to that extent. Can’t you just make it work to the point of losing consciousness?”

“It’s better you don’t pursue this any further.” Suirei wasn’t interested. “Devil’s trumpet is a deadly poison. I understand very well the effort to remove pain for the patient. However, for you to come to a criminal like me to seek my knowledge, I can tell that you must be in dire straits. What kind of person do you wish to use it on?”

Suirei was sharp. And A’duo was able to guess who from Suirei’s words.

“Oh ho, could it be that guy’s illness has returned?”

How disrespectful.

A’duo’s that guy referred to the emperor.

“What were his symptoms like at the time?” Maomao asked without revealing his name.

“I remember that he kept being in terrible shape. The court physician’s record would be more accurate than my words. What *I* can say are the things he argued with his grandmother about.”

It seems A’duo had a good memory of it.

“With the Empress Regnant?”

“The Empress Regnant, you say, well, it’s easy to know who we’re referring to. You wanna hear about it? It’s between a granny who doesn’t step down from the political scene even when she’s over eighty years old and a rebellious crown prince. The cold era even reached my ears at the time. He would grumble about it to me every time it happened, but it was truly distressing during the middle of it.” A’duo set down the pipe and took a sip from her teacup.

“What did they have disputes on?”

“…Should I talk about it? Well, should be fine. The empress regnant had symptoms of dementia in her later years.”

Maomao and Suirei jolted in surprise. Only Chue started to work on the pastries.

“Then, what about her ruling?”

That can’t be true, Maomao thought

“No, she didn’t forget anything at all. Occasionally, she would be concerningly thoughtless.”

“There seem to be some concerning circumstances, I see,”

“Yeah, If I were to bring up Isei Province from eighteen years ago, you’d understand?”

“…”

This topic keeps popping right back up!

It was the topic that Maomao’s group was busy with last year.

“At the time, a letter about the Ih clan’s treason was delivered, and due to some slipup, it was stamped with the emperor’s approval. Due to that incident, Yang, no, the current emperor became aware of the Empress Regnant’s disorder.”

Scary, scary, scary.

Even if they were relatives, they didn’t see each other constantly. More importantly, no person could speak frankly to the person who was the supreme wielder of power in the country. Even if there were multiple signs, no one would be able to bring it up.

His grandmother held the reins of power, and his father was a puppet–with the crown prince in the middle of it all, if he wanted to do anything, his mental stress would be no joke.

“But the symptoms disappeared once before?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if it’s for better or worse, but the Empress Regnant, and then the previous emperor passed away one after the other.”

In other words, the source of his stress was eliminated.

“He had been busy during the coronation and stuff, but the transfer of work was surprisingly easy. Also, he was able to recuperate during the mourning period.”

“I have a question.”

“Fret not. It wasn’t assassination.”

“I guess so.”

The Empress Regnant was elderly and the previous emperor was over sixty years of age. She wanted to believe they died of natural causes.

“If it’s a relapse, he might have something to worry about again.”

“Something to worry about…”

A relative to the emperor other than the Empress Regnant came to mind. There was one person. Although he was titled the imperial brother, he had worked hard on the countermeasures for the locust plague for a year.

If he’s his biological son, then wouldn’t he be very worried?

Suirei sighed deeply. “I don’t believe my knowledge will be useful all the more.” She declined once again.

“You’d listen to my orders, no?” A’duo said.

“I cannot serve poison to a noble person under A’duo-sama’s orders.”

“It’s not a poison. If you keep to the directions of use, it’s a medicine.”

“There might be people who would frame A’duo-sama. What will you do when that happens?”

Suirei’s words had a lot of valid points. A’duo’s villa was full of people who would be in danger from being investigated. Even under normal circumstances, she was ousted from her position as a consort, so her being sheltered outside the inner palace was a puzzling situation.

It wouldn’t be odd for her to be seen as a political opponent due to the factions.

Maomao decided to change her phrasing.

“There are other patients that require the mafeisan. What if we use it for the sake of these patients?”

Alongside the medicine trial that was currently taking place, they would also test to see if surgery would prove useful as well. There was a degree of danger, but it might be better when compared to having nothing to deal with the pain.

The emperor and the townspeople’s lives.

Maomao had some thoughts about it, but she could only turn a blind eye to it.

“Will you do it?”

“…Okay.”

When A’duo pressed her again, Suirei had no choice but to agree.

8. Meat Diet, Plant Diet

Right after the holiday break, it was the tall senior who paired up with Maomao. He had switched with the short senior.

“I look forward to working with you,” Maomao said.

“Yeah, regards.” The tall senior was more casual in his speech compared to the short senior, but his height made him intimidating. When he stood next to Maomao, there was a sense of imbalance, but he was thinner and lankier than Rihaku.

Today, she will be spending half the day making medicine in the imperial court. As for the rest of the day…

“So you also have work in the inner palace this afternoon?” the tall senior asked.

“Yes. It’s something I’ve done before when I used to be a palace lady,” Maomao said.

This was the official reason.

The two of them chatted as they made glutinous rice powder on a millstone.

There's no way Suirei can be summoned to the imperial court.

It would be scary if she got identified.

"Hey, can I ask you one thing?" he asked.

"What is it?" she said.

"Is the inner palace all beautiful women?"

Here came the question, straight to the point.

"Well, I guess. All the consorts were beautiful, the palace ladies too."

There would be some degree of selection made upon entering the inner palace. Of course, there would be outliers like Maomao mixed in, but most of them were above average.

"Oh ho."

"But it isn't like the world you have in mind," she said bluntly. "No girls are giggling and chittering in joy."

Sometimes, they would poison or be poisoned. Slander and malicious gossip would fly about. There would be fights where they tackle and pull at each other's hair. In addition, they would also indulge in relationships between people of the same gender or eunuchs, but it was probably best she kept that titbit ambiguous.

"Don't be too blunt."

"They can't all hold hands and get along since it's a place where they all have to vie for the emperor's limited favour."

Seeing how they were sensible towards high-ranking people, that is, Empress Gyokuyou and Consort Lihua, it was probably on the better side of things.

The previous emperor's inner palace must have been a terrible place to be.

Just the thought of it gave her goosebumps.

"No, but you know."

Seems like the tall senior hasn't completely let go of his dream yet. Even those earnest-seeming seniors would show vulgar expressions while they were chatting.

As they were speaking in the middle of working, it looked like they were messing around, but surprisingly enough, the high officials didn't tell them off. This was because court physicians needed the ability to gather information while questioning another person. As long as their hands didn't go wild as well, it was fine for them to talk.

"That being said, the other day, I saw the empress for the first time. She was beautiful."

"She is, right?" Maomao was a little proud.

"The girl that is her relative was also beautiful. So foreign blood will grant you such beautiful hair, I see."

"It's not just because they're foreigners. Red hair is rare."

Aside from Empress Gyokuyou, Maomao has never seen anyone with such distinctly red hair. She had come across people with similar shades of colour in Isei Province, but they were few and far between. Since there were fewer than blonde or silver hair, red must be quite a rare colour.

"That being said, I heard that there was a case where someone acquired red hair. Do you know about it?" he asked.

"Is it like how you can get white hair from shock?" she said. There was a story about how someone's hair turned white overnight after experiencing fright. In reality, it wasn't the case, but people getting strands of white hair due to stressors wouldn't be anything unusual.

"Nope. I heard it's due to malnutrition."

"Malnutrition."

In that case, would it mean that they had a time when they didn't have enough nutrients for hair growth?

"Is the nutrient they lack meat?"

She heard that the source of nutrients for hair and nails was found in meat and fish.

"I guess so. Apparently, the colour of the hair faded into blonde or red."

His apparently would mean that he's never seen it before, but that's an interesting story I heard, Maomao thought. She had heard many stories from her adoptive father Luomen and read books—even despite that, it wasn't something she had known.

“That was an interesting story.” Maomao scraped up the powder that had fallen from the millstone. “Do you have anything else?”

“Don’t ask your senior for the unreasonable. There’s only so much that I know—” the tall senior groaned as he turned the millstone. He was a good senior who listened to his junior’s requests. “Speaking of meat…”

“You have something?” Maomao’s eyes shone.

“Yeah. Why don’t we take this opportunity to make it a question-and-answer session?

“A question-and-answer session?” Maomao nodded. She wasn’t fussed about winning or losing, so she didn’t care whichever way it went.

“Have at it then. A long time ago, our country suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of another country. The soldier who had commanded the army was intelligent, composed and a good judge of things. He had confirmed the state of affairs and anticipated victory, so why did we lose?”

“…This is outside my area of expertise.” Maomao furrowed her brows. The topic was completely different from what she was expecting. “Please give me a hint.”

“Think a little.”

“It’s outside my area of expertise.”

They chatted as they turned the millstone and scraped up the flour.

“The hint is meat.”

“Meat?” Maomao tilted her head and groaned.

Meat, meat, meat…

Is it not something like they were done in by a special trap?

That probably doesn’t have anything to do with meat.

Nutrition? No…

Maomao patted the powder from her hands. Glutinous rice flour had a smooth whiteness, which seemed like it could be used as face powder. It was made from polished rice, which was free of rice bran, that had been milled into flour.

“…Rice bran.” Maomao clapped.

“You got it?”

“Yes. Could the smart soldier guy have misjudged the size of the enemy troops?”

“Why do you think so?”

“It would have to be that the enemy ate meat a lot. I’ve heard of a method where to know the scale of the enemy forces, you investigate the enemy’s waste. On whether meat or grains is their staple. Since plant eaters would have more excrement than meat eaters.”

When you ingest food that is high in dietary fibre, you poop more. Occasionally, it could be two times or three times more than usual. Brown rice has more dietary fibre than polished white rice.

This meant that the soldier completely miscalculated his opponent’s numbers when he used their own norms to estimate the amount of waste.

The tall senior made a circle with his hands. Correct.

“Do you have anything else?” Maomao asked.

“I’ll look for something.” The tall senior went back to turning the millstone in a bid to have her give him a break.

Maomao went to A’duo’s villa in the afternoon.

“This is all the data that I can remember.” Suirei handed Maomao a note. It was a list of poisonous plants, like Devil’s Trumpet, to give an example.

“They’re all poisons that would kill you normally,” Maomao said.

“Yes. After all, it is a drug that grants you death, even if temporarily.”

“It didn’t hurt, right?”

“Once you wake up, it does.”

Suirei’s account was reliable, even though her speech was completely lacking in motivation.

“Just in case, I’ve also included information from Sha’ou here. I haven’t verified it yet.”

Sha’ou was Li’s neighbouring country. Their former priestess was being sheltered at A’duo’s villa.

“Is there another medicine that you can use to remove the sense of pain?”

Suirei wrote down an example. “This one is no good.”

“Why?”

“It works well at first, but you get dependent on it and once your body gets used to it, its effect weakens.”

Maomao shook her head. “If that’s the case, then wouldn’t it be a problem even if we use a poisonous substance then?”

“I guess so.”

The perfect anaesthesia doesn’t exist. They could only look for something with few side effects that could work within their circumstances.

“How about acupuncture?”

“I was thinking that’d be impossible when you’ll be slicing the abdomen open. What if it makes them lose consciousness?”

“The one who made them lose consciousness would get their heads chopped off on the grounds of lese majeste.”

“We’ll have him bear with it.”

“It’ll be scary if he thrashes from the pain.”

“We’ll do something about it.”

“Even if we do, the people around us won’t permit it.”

“Such a pain, imperials.”

“Hear, hear.”

By the second half, both Maomao and Suirei were exhausted.

“Likely, what we spoke about has already been attempted by other court physicians,” Suirei said as she picked up her note.

“But which court physician would also attempt it?” Maomao said.

“I wonder too.”

Suirei brought over a cage with mice inside from the corner of the room. It seems she had started to experiment with the medicine on mice while she made her complaints. “Medicine is difficult. It’s nothing as straightforward as halving the dosage to get half the sleeping time.”

“Yes. A halfhearted attempt at a dosage would be entirely ineffective.” Maomao understood from experimenting on her own arm.

“Can I give you my personal opinion?” Suirei picked up a mouse and checked its movement. “I don’t know what kind of person the emperor is. However, is he someone who would refuse surgery for fear of pain? As long as the medical treatment is settled, I doubt they would place that much importance on anaesthesia. In fact, I feel like what happens before or after the operation would be important.”

“Before the operation?”

She understood the reason for after the operation. There were many cases of people dying from an infection after an abdominal surgery.

“Whether the emperor would be up for surgery or not. Whether the people around him would allow the surgery or not.”

“…That is outside the scope of our work.”

That would be the emperor and Jinshi’s area.

“Right. And so, I’ll look into the anaesthesia. It’ll be more efficient for you to look into the medicine for post-operative care.”

“Understood.” Maomao pocketed the note.

Do what you can. Leave the rest to others.

She never thought about doing everything herself. How nice would it be if she had the ability to back up that arrogance in thinking she could do everything.

Maomao sighed as she left the villa.

9 The Sun Prince

Everything Kyouyou did was decided at birth.

The emperor's sole imperial prince–that was the position he was given.

He was always under someone's supervision. He was rarely given free rein. If there was a time when he would barely have any freedom, it would be the moment he played with his milk siblings.

"It's time for your meal," Gaoshun said the moment Kyouyou's duties ended and he was about to sit down. His milk brother, two years his senior, had accompanied Zuigetsu for a time. He was told that normally that role should be left to another member of the Ma clan. Gaoshun, who had called a different name then, didn't have anyone to replace himself as Kyouyou's aide-slash-guard. This was precisely the reason why Gaoshun had to be assigned to Zuigetsu.

Lunch was a congee where rice grains couldn't even be found and a soup devoid of ingredients. There were also proper dishes prepared separately.

Were he given only a sick person's fare, it would rouse people's suspicion. Hence, the normal dishes.

"Take this before your meal," Gaoshun said.

"…Do I have to?" Kyouyou asked.

"You must." Gaoshun thrust the medicine over to him.

A characteristically bitter smell. In the beginning, fruit juice and honey were added to the concoction to mask the taste, but while it did help somewhat, it gave him more to drink so he had put a stop to that.

He drank up the medicine, then picked up the spoon to dig into the slurry-like congee. The congee, steeped with the flavour of meat and salt, might have tasted a little better if it wasn't in this form.

Kyouyou took three bites and put down the spoon.

"Does it hurt?"

"It needn't be asked."

Chronic abdominal pains gradually worsen. He also had signs of mild fever and nausea. It was the same pain he experienced before, so he thought it'd be fine if he followed the same treatment regimen. However, there were no signs of him recovering.

"*What are the court physicians doing*?"

"My deepest apologies."

He knew there was no point in lashing out at Gaoshun. But if anyone got vomited on, they might talk about it in public.

Like how Zuigetsu presumed upon Gaoshun, Kyouyou did the same.

He's a fine man even among those of the Ma clan, Kyouyou thought.

Amidst that, they heard the sound of footsteps.

Then sounds of voices from behind the door.

"Not good. You're in the middle of eating right now," Gaoshun said.

"It's fine. I think I know who it is." Kyouyou had a cold feeling about the voice that could be heard even from behind the door.

A group of people showed up with a man in his fifties at the centre. He was lanky and looked younger than his actual age. His baby face was probably a family trait.

"You're in the middle of eating. Pardon me." The man approached with a grin, but Gaoshun blocked his path. The guards outside the room also scowled at him.

"If you believe you're being rude, then you're better off not coming at all," Kyouyou said.

"Hahah. Harsh. Is that how you treat your uncle?"

Uncle–in other words, the older brother of Anshi, Kyouyou's mother. His name was Hao.

"Hm. So you mean you have the right to interrupt my meal because you are my uncle."

"No, no. Don't be absurd." Hao waved his hand widely in denial, but he wasn't making any signs to leave.

Anshi herself didn't possess that much lust for power. However, her family was different. They had sent her in to entice the previous emperor who only had a taste for young children. As her family had plotted, Anshi fell pregnant with Kyouyou, and she had gone on to become the empress, then the empress dowager.

The Empress Regnant, Kyouyou's grandmother, had noticed their ambition, which was why she didn't give Kyouyou's maternal relatives an important position while she was still alive.

However, when the Empress Regnant passed away, they paraded themselves even since Kyouyou assumed the throne. Anshi's father had long passed away, but her half-brother started to show off.

Being maternal relatives, no one could speak firmly against him.

His mother didn't have much good feelings towards her half-brother. Kyouyou felt the same, but it wouldn't do him any good to show that openly.

Should Kyouyou merely let slip his discontent, heads could roll.

"However, you should have a more enjoyable meal," Hao said, looking at the dishes that had been brought over. He would suspect if his meal was a simple spread of just congee and soup.

"Preparing for food tasters would give more work for people." Kyouyou held up the cup that had contained his medicine. Gaoshun carefully poured in some wine.

"True. You don't know who is after your life. In particular, the western folk *are* savages."

He understood what Hao was trying to say. He was displeased with the current crown prince. According to blood relations, the crown prince would be his younger sister Anshi's grandchild, so he would be his granduncle. However, the crown prince's mother was Gyokuyou. Even if they were both the crown prince's maternal relatives, the Gyoku clan would possess political influence hereafter.

Hao must be anxious. He'd thought with the hindrance, the Empress Regnant, gone, he would exercise power, but his relative Anshi was passive. Moreover, a clan of western savages he had looked down upon was recently bestowed a name.

He had indirectly mentioned before in the past that he wanted a name, but Kyouyou had ignored him continuously.

"Even if you are my uncle, please stop talking about all sorts of things regarding the crown prince. I have already made my decision."

"Is that so? I guess. My deepest apologies. However, what if I tell you that it looks like the crown prince is a temporary title to me?" Hao squinted. His lips, covered by his hands in a fist-and-palm salute, looked like it was smiling. "It was the same with Consort Lihua's first child. As the first son to be born, he was consequently the crown prince."

"Lihua is a high-ranking consort. Do you have a problem with that?"

“Nonsense. I just had a thought. What if, your first child was still alive.”

“That matter is over.”

Kyouyou rocked his cup. He looked at the rippling red liquid without taking a sip of the wine.

It was already over. His child with A’duo was already established as gone.

As far as Hao was concerned, it would be favourable for him if A’duo’s child were alive. A’duo lacked supporters, so should he become her guardian, it would secure him the position to act proudly even in the next era of rule.

And the problem with that was that it was also Kyouyou’s desire.

“Yes, he would have surely grown up to be a dignified young man. Just like Zuigetsu-sama.”

“…” Kyouyou scowled at Hao wordlessly. However, his vision was cut off.

“Ngh?!” Hao’s eyes widened. A sword was thrust before his nose.

It was Gaoshun who had drawn that sword. The normally taciturn, furrow-browed, hardworking man, who was made light of as a henpecked husband even. Moreover, he had to pretend to be a eunuch for seven years due to Zuigetsu’s wilfulness.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?!”

Hao’s guards responded. They weren’t allowed to be armed since they were in the emperor’s room, but all three of them were brawny men.

“Rescind your words. Why do you think you could utter the Moon Prince’s name without consequence?” Gaoshun’s gaze pierced Hao, sharper than the tip of his sword. “The sole person who has the right to call the Moon Prince by his name is, currently, his imperial majesty. You do not understand your position. It is a grave sin, perhaps you can even say you lied to the heavens.”

Even among the Ma clan, Gaoshun had a particularly genial personality. He could see how cocky Hao had been to have such a man act in this way.

The guards couldn't move. Gaoshun would behead Hao faster than they could subdue him. If anything, he would even take out the guards as well. He was that skilled.

Kyouyou wondered if he should let him behead him. Doing so would put a load off his shoulders, but it'd be a pain to deal with the aftermath. To say nothing of cleaning the room, bumping Hao off would weaken Anshi's family, something he'd want to avoid. With the elimination of the Shi clan, the power dynamics in the imperial court had gone out of whack. It wouldn't be good to eliminate any more factions.

Kyouyou lifted a hand to have Gaoshun lower his sword.

Pale-faced, Hao glared at Gaoshun. "Who are you to treat me like this?!" he yelled, spittle flying.

"You're right. I lack the position."

The Ma clan were never assigned to posts. Gaoshun was no exception.

"However, I am his imperial majesty's sword. I only move as he wills it."

"That's correct. No one gave you permission to call Zuigetsu by his name. Only I have the right to do so," Kyouyou said.

Hao bit his lips.

Hao was Kyouyou's maternal relative. His maternal relative, but not of the imperial family. And calling out the names of high-ranking imperials was taboo.

For better or worse, Hao was a middling man.

Middling ambition. Middling foolishness.

It'd be troubling if he was a capable person. He would be difficult to deal with, then.

If he continued his foolish actions, Kyouyou should tighten the reins to show who was boss. "Do you think you should stay here any longer?"

"…My deepest apologies." Hao's attitude changed completely. "I will visit again," he said, then left.

After the footsteps completely faded, Kyouyou stroked his belly.

"Does it hurt?" Gaoshun asked.

"Yeah. It hurts more than before."

“What could Hao-sama be thinking about?”

“What do you think? He probably wants to reinstate Yue as the crown prince.”

“Is that so?” Gaoshun didn’t have his sharp gaze from before. “You don’t intend to do so, right?” He said in his usual tone of voice.

“…I guess.” Kyouyou, without giving a clear answer, set down his glass of wine.

10. Medical Conference

It began, partly without warning and partly within expectations.

The court physicians were assembled in a conference room. Maomao was called over to be a scribe, but going by the faces gathered here, she could imagine what they were going to talk about.

Court Physician Liu. Luomen. Tall Senior. Short Senior. There was no Middle Classmate. Instead, Tianyu, rolling his eyes, was present. There were also court physicians who were skilled in surgery here.

It has to be related to his imperial majesty.

Maomao would probably be refused like the Middle Classmate as well with her position. She might be here as a scribe because of Jinshi’s arrangement or because she was Luomen’s carer. Although, she was bothered by how Tianyu was present like it was natural—but based on surgical skill alone, she could see why.

She was taking notes on the conference, while seated next to Luomen. Luomen spoke mainly about medicine, whereas Court Physician Liu spoke mainly about surgery.

Afterwards, there was a team that researched anaesthesia, as well as a team that researched post-operation medicine.

I pretty much handed the materials I got from Suirei to Dad.

While she had no idea if it proved useful, she wondered if it got used as a reference.

The old tattered pages from the restored Kada's book were carefully laid out in front of Court Physician Liu's desk. There was an illustration of a dissected person. It was probably there to be displayed, considering how there were only court physicians here and that the door was locked.

"Everyone, please give us a rundown on the results of your assignments."

At Court Physician Liu's words, the tall senior stood up first.

"As of now, we have confirmed the usefulness of the medicine, however…"

There were clear differences between the group that was prescribed medicine and the group that was not. The medicine was effective. However, due to individual differences, some patients had yet to recover even among the medicated group. They attributed it to the fact that the recovered were originally patients with mild symptoms. However, they could tell that their rate of deterioration was slower than those from the unmedicated group.

Luomen spoke to supplement the tall senior's presentation.

Court Physician Liu looked as though he expected this result.

Maomao noted it down with ease. She was already aware of the details, so it took her no trouble to write it.

The next presentation by the anaesthesia group began. They talked about the degree of pain that was relieved by herbal medicines, which they had focused on, as well as alcohol, acupuncture, compression and cooling. Naturally, the greater the pain removed, the greater the danger. Dangerous names like Devil's Trumpet, aconite, mandrake and opium were mentioned.

Pain comes with getting cut open.

The issue was how much pain was permissible. There were many stories of daring people who had been operated on without minding the pain. However, pain relief would decrease the possibility of insanity during the surgery.

Will they perceive the anaesthesia as medicine or poison?

The difficult part was making that distinction.

Maomao did her best to record it all down without changing the meaning. There was another court physician who was taking notes aside from her, so if she made a mistake, they could compare their notes.

Most surprisingly, it was the surgery team who made progress with their research.

“We have discovered a key breakthrough solution for the disease, although it would depend on the conditions.”

Maomao’s eyes widened. She watched intently. Being a serious announcement, Court Physician Liu did the presentation.

“If it is the case that the focus isn’t the cecum but the appendix, we can prevent a recurrence through surgical removal. We have discovered through autopsies that many cases were due to the appendix, not the cecum.”

Maomao had her eyes zeroed on Court Physician Liu.

“Maomao dear.”

When Luomen poked her, she remembered she had note-taking to do and moved her brush.

The appendix. If she remembered correctly from her dissections, it was the organ that stuck out like a worm.

“Would cutting the appendix out pose no issue?”

A court physician raised the question, saving Maomao the trouble of asking it herself.

“It’s said that it is a relatively safe section. At least, there is more danger from the appendix rupturing from the buildup of pus.”

Should the pus spread inside the abdomen, it would give rise to other illnesses, leading to death.

Kada’s book laid out before Court Physician Liu had the appendix section drawn in detail.

“Has the surgery been attempted?”

“It has. There is an eighty percent success rate, according to our observations.”

“What about the remaining twenty percent?”

“Ten percent had already developed peritonitis from a ruptured appendix. Although we removed the appendix and cleared away as much pus as we could, they passed away as a result of that. The remaining ten percent died due to an infection at the surgical site.”

Twenty percent… Should she take that number as high or low?

These numbers are not reassuring.

“What happens if it’s not the appendix?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

It seems Court Physician Liu was implying that they had no time to spare. Maomao did her best to record it all down without including her personal thoughts.

Lastly, there was a presentation regarding post-operation medical care. Alongside a method to maintain cleanliness to prevent infections, they also talked about antipyic herbal medicines.

Our work can no longer do anything for his imperial majesty.

The prerequisite for surgery was that medication was impossible for recovery.

A court physician from the anaesthesia team raised his hand. “Excuse me. I would like to confirm something. Would that be okay?”

“Say it.”

“Who will we be using the results of our research on?”

He phrased it as a question, but it was a confirmation. She doubted anyone here didn’t know “who” it was.

“It’s the person you’re thinking of.”

Court Physician Liu didn’t clarify. They didn’t know if they were correct on what he didn’t clarify. However, the fact that he didn’t give out a name revealed a precarious factor to what they were attempting to do.

They will be operating on the emperor. In other words, they had to administer anaesthesia that could become poison should there be a mistake at one step of the way, had to slice into his belly with a blade and remove an organ. Moreover, even if the operation was a success, they had to pay special attention to his progress post-operation.

If everyone here is a part of it, the medical office would stop existing.

Thus, they had to consider the minimum amount of people to know the details of the surgery.

Court Physician Liu, Dad, and a few others.

He implied that failure amounted to decapitation. Depending on the case, familial extermination could also be a possibility.

In that case, I'd be killed too.

Even though the weirdo tactician and Rahan couldn't be helped, she wanted Rahan's older brother to escape somehow.

Of course, she didn't want to think about her respected dad failing.

"Now, everyone whose name I call out, stay behind."

Court Physician Liu called names. And every person whose name was called out had expressions of resolve.

Then she noticed one of them had a detached expression. It was Tianyu.

That guy only has his skill to speak of.

Maomao clicked her tongue.

"Maomao."

?!

Being the last one to be called out, Maomao jolted in surprise. The tall senior and the short senior looked at her in concern, but they also left the room.

She didn't think she would be called out too. The herbal medicines she made wouldn't be useful for post-operative care.

Looking around restlessly, she got up from her seat and approached Court Physician Liu.

"You look like you don't understand why your name was called out," he said.

"Yes."

"It's simple. You're already associated with Luomen, so it's less dangerous to pick you over other unrelated people."

"I see."

His judgement was logical.

“Also, should anything happen, Grand Marshal Kan will definitely get himself involved.”

“I see…”

Maomao narrowed her eyes.

If they wound up on the chopping block, they would wish to have the weirdo tactician come in to muddy the waters with some commotion.

Court Physician Liu was a cunning man.

A few days after that, Maomao was given a rundown on the steps involving the surgery that would be happening later. That being said, her main duty was to select the herbal medicine to be used and compound them–it could be said she was the right person for the right job. Under Luomen’s directions, she bought higher-quality herbal medicines and carefully processed them. Basically, she was brought into the post-operative care team.

The tall senior and the others continued the medicine trials. Patients whose conditions worsened were given anaesthesia, operated on and then put under observation.

As for the anaesthesia, they ended up not using Devil’s Trumpet. Like Suirei had said, the risk was too high, but they also determined that his imperial majesty would be able to bear the remaining pain.

Young people who can’t handle pain wouldn’t be able to bear with their bodies being cut up while conscious. However, it seems Court Physician Liu had judged that his imperial majesty would be able to handle it. No doubt he had quite a strong force of will since he made no show that he was hindered by the continuing chronic pain in his work.

She thought the medical treatment would proceed without a hitch.

“SURGERY?! NO WAY IN HELL!”

Until a high official appeared, speaking of strange things.

11. Explanation and Approval

The source of the leak was unknown. Rather, they were too good at hiding it, Maomao thought.

So much so that Jinshi didn't look confident about it either.

The advance arrangements had already been made, so the operation was the last thing left on the agenda–and that was when everyone decided to step in.

Not like it's anything unusual.

Even in pharmacies in town, relatives of regulars would come complaining about how the medicine was expensive or useless, then take the patient away, saying they'll look for a different way to treat them.

It'd be good if he lived, though.

If that patient was the person who stood at the top of the country, there was no helping that they would have a deep interest in the treatment method.

Surgery was only done in extraordinary circumstances. While an external injury was a different matter, she understood the need for urgency–but the typical mindset was that illnesses were cured through medicine.

We're doing this because medicine can't cure him!

Maomao crushed the medicinal herbs with all her might.

"You're going to tire yourself out."

A middle-aged woman beside her said. It was thanks to this woman's presence that Maomao didn't feel out of place among the court physicians.

"Auntie is old, so it is important for me to distribute my energy. You'll be exhausted afterwards if you neglect to allot your energy just because you're young."

Like how she called herself an auntie, she actually did look like one. Although she was a few years above fifty, she didn't specify her exact age, but she had age-appropriate wrinkles as well. Her moderately plump figure was proof that she was well-off, but the tips of her fingers were stained in a way that couldn't be washed off. Maomao could tell that her fingers were of someone who had compounded medicine for many years.

Her nickname was Auntie Liu. It was a common surname, but the representative *Liu* among the court physicians was Court Physician Liu. Auntie Liu, was that Court Physician Liu's younger sister.

"There'll be a lot of nepotism this time around. Don't resent me for it," Court Physician Liu had said.

If the emperor's treatment were to fail, the associated court physicians and their relatives would be executed. Thus, Court Physician Liu decided to employ the relatives of these court physicians. It goes without saying, that although they were relatives, Court Physician Liu wouldn't employ laymen.

"Hahaha, it was my first time working outside of my family, so I'm nervous. Please treat me favourably, Senior."

Auntie Liu had an aptitude for medicine. She was engaged in medicine for many years at Court Physician Liu's family, so her hand movements were practised.

However, it seems she never married and had no children either. The reason was indicated by her darkened fingers. Many people see medicine as a lowly occupation. How many have decided that she was an incompatible bride just by seeing her dirty fingers alone?

In a sense, Auntie Liu was one of the paths that Maomao might end up in life.

Like how Maomao was irritated, the other court physicians were the same.

"We've done all the preparations already, and yet–"

"He's going to worsen at this rate."

A case of appendicitis, going by Court Physician Liu's examination, would be a race against time.

"Yes, yes. Getting irritated won't fix the problem. We can only do what we can." Auntie Liu eased down the prickly atmosphere. Though her age reminded Maomao of Jinshi's nanny Suiren, she wasn't two-faced.

She doesn't resemble Court Physician Liu at all.

No, rather, it was because their personalities were dissimilar that she could deal with them if anything. They wouldn't call her Auntie Liu otherwise.

The workplace mood has improved thanks to Auntie Liu, so Court Physician Liu was resourceful for having anticipated that and dispatching her.

It seems Auntie Liu was already acquainted with the other court physicians.

“But Auntie..”

“Uh-huh, we’ve staked our lives on this, you know.”

Even the court physicians who usually spoke formally were also becoming casual.

As Maomao prepared tea, she went around with Auntie to talk to people.

Apparently, it wasn’t one person who was opposed to the surgery. The empress dowager’s family and Gyoku’en’s faction were making their voices heard. In other words, the empress dowager faction and the empress faction–both of them were influencing it.

“Well, I understand both sides.”

For the empress dowager faction, if the surgery were to fail, the crown prince who wasn’t five yet would become the emperor. Be it the case, the empress’ father Gyoku’en would probably become regent.

As for the opposing empress faction, it was clear that giving support to a young emperor while he didn’t have solid standing would put them on the receiving end of antagonism. More importantly, in terms of age, the imperial brother, Jinshi, was older. That was why they were vocal about making Jinshi the emperor.

Either side has a lot of disadvantages.

They were making their demands since they were in an era where there was no great turmoil. In troubled times, the blood relations from previous eras would spring up and the imperial throne would be stained with blood.

Although this would probably be preferable over that.

How should she explain to them that doing nothing would equate to a bad move?

Maomao took a sip of tea as she listened to the court physicians grumbling nearby.

That same day at the dorms, there were a couple of unfamiliar men at Maomao’s dorms. A splendid carriage was parked there. The dorm caretaker was watching them dubiously.

“What is it?”

Her junior Changsha was watching, puzzled. They hadn't seen each other at work lately, but the two of them took turns to cook at the dorms. Maomao was back today from buying ingredients after work.

It's not Chue-san.

Chue would be more careful when summoning her for Jinshi's business. She would pick a carriage that was a little more lowkey, or park the carriage somewhere further away.

"Will you come with us?" They said, showing her the crest of a tree peony.

That's Empress Gyokuyou's crest.

Maomao stared at the men's faces. She would be more at ease if they were faces she knew, but unfortunately, they weren't. Maomao was a goldfish who wouldn't remember a face she'd seen once.

She'll follow them assuming they were Empress Gyokuyou's messengers. However, if they were impersonators, she wanted to turn them down.

While she hesitated, a familiar face appeared from inside the carriage. "Maomao."

"Hongniang-sama."

It was Empress Gyokuyou's head attendant.

"You will come, yes?"

"Yes." With the head attendant here in person, Maomao couldn't refuse either. "Changsha-san. Will you be okay to eat dinner alone?"

"Yes," Changsha said.

Maomao passed the ingredients she bought to Changsha and then got onto the carriage.

As predicted, the carriage entered the empress' palace.

While they were walking through the palace, Hongniang asked her a couple of questions. "Do you know why you've been summoned here?"

"Is it about his imperial majesty?" Maomao said.

The high officials were yapping about the surgery. There was no way Empress Gyokuyou wouldn't know.

“Yes. Do you know about what we’ll be asking you?”

“About whether the court physicians’ explanations are true or not. You want to hear it directly from me.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Of course, you cannot have me coming after I ask my boss for instructions.”

“It’ll be troubling if you had arranged beforehand to get your stories straight.”

I still have my own position to consider too.

Although Maomao complained, she couldn’t refuse here.

Guards stood before the room she was guided to. Hongniang raised her hand, and they opened the door.

Inside, Empress Gyokuyou was reclined on a daybed. Beside her were the attendants she was familiar with, as well as a girl with hair the same bright shade as Empress Gyokuyou’s. Was she the daughter Gyoku’ou sent previously?

There was also a slender-eyed woman with braided hair. Her face was plain and she was tall. She looked to be from the same age group as Hongniang, over thirty.

Is she from the West?

She looked like a person from Isei Province from her tanned skin and slightly peculiar clothes.

Maomao bowed her head deeply.

“It’s been a while. How have you been?”

Maomao raised her head after Empress Gyokuyou addressed her. “There have been no changes.”

“So I see. Please, take a seat.”

“Yes, thank you very much.” She sat down.

The three girls–Yinghua and the others–looked at Maomao fondly.

“Yes, you all have other things to do. We’ll be having an important conversation, so please leave,” Hongniang said.

“Noo…” the girls said.

“It’s not, noo*!”*

“*“YES!”*”

It seems like Hongniang and the three girls were in good health. Empress Gyokuyou watched their exchange in amusement.

The three girls and the unfamiliar foreign-looking girl left the room. The unfamiliar woman with braided hair stayed behind.

The door was firmly locked and the guards stood on a lookout outside so no one could eavesdrop.

Empress Gyokuyou was the first to open her mouth. “You’ve heard about the matter from Hongniang, right? Sorry for the rush, but can you tell me what is the situation?”

“The court physicians have deemed that it would be impossible to cure him with medicine now. According to his symptoms, it’s appendicitis. He would need to get surgery before his condition worsens to remove the appendix, which is the focus of the disease.” Despite Maomao’s thoughts, she answered honestly. Court Physician Liu and Luomen won’t lie to her about his condition. They would have no reason to.

From what she could tell from looking at Empress Gyokuyou and the other’s expressions, they received the same explanation.

“Would removing the focus mean cutting into the abdomen?” Empress Gyokuyou asked.

“Yes.”

“Will it succeed?” Empress Gyokuyou said anxiously. The anxiety wasn’t just for the crown prince’s future but for the emperor as well.

The relationship between the emperor and the empress wasn’t decided by the words love or affection. Even so, it didn’t mean that Empress Gyokuyou held no fondness for him at all.

“The court physicians will do their best.”

“There is a chance of failure, right?”

“…” Maomao thought for a moment. “The success rate would be over ninety percent if we go by his condition today. However, the rate might drop as time passes.”

“The reason for the drop?”

“The affected area filling up with pus and rupturing will give rise to other diseases. Thus, the passing of time will go hand-in-hand with whether he lives or dies.” Maomao did her best to pick words that would be easy to understand.

“Then, what other examples of failure are there?”

“There is the case of poison getting into the surgical wound to cause infection.”

“You mean getting poisoned?”

“Not so. Say, when you scrape your knee, if you leave it alone without cleaning the wound, the poison from the dirt will get into it and make it fester. It’s the same as that. It is not good to touch an open wound with dirty hands.” Maomao also frankly replied with an example of failure. Hiding it would only garner distrust.

“Last question. What if the court physicians made a mistake with the examination and it turns out to not be this appendicitis thing?”

“If that’s the case, then there’s nothing we can do. However, it probably wouldn’t mean that the surgery was for naught.”

It would be good to give the different focus a firsthand visual inspection. Otherwise, they could ease the symptoms a little by clearing away the pus in the belly.

The medical treatment would be delayed, but it would be better than leaving it alone.

Empress Gyokuyou, Hongniang and the woman with the braided hair exchanged glances.

“Is my explanation different from what the other court physicians said?” Maomao asked.

“No.” Empress Gyokuyou smiled bitterly. “You didn’t arrange beforehand to tell the same story from the start, right?”

“If we did that, we’d be hiding the failure rate of the surgery better.”

“You’re right,” Empress Gyokuyou said with a sigh, then looked at the woman with the braided hair. “As you can see. Will you explain all that properly to Father for me, Elder Sister?”

Elder sister.

Maomao finally knew who the woman with the braided hair was. She was one of Empress Gyokuyou’s many siblings.

“Understood. However, I won’t be taking the responsibility for how the people around him would take it,” the woman said.

“So you mean Father understands, right?”

The woman with the braided hair was silent.

“Haaah, I’m sorry for suddenly calling you here, Maomao.”

“It’s fine.” Maomao was also relieved that she didn’t say anything wrong.

“You haven’t had dinner yet, right? Why not stay for a meal?”

Maomao inadvertently pressed her belly.

I want to eat, I really do.

But if she ate here, it would render the meaning of her giving a proper explanation moot.

People might think I got bribed by the food.

Maomao bit her lip, then bowed her head. “My deepest apologies. I have already eaten.”

She then left the room, suppressing her stomach rumbles.

12. Sowing Seeds

Jinshi got a headache.

“What will happen if something were to happen to his imperial majesty?”

The officials sought confirmation from him through questions.

The answer they desired differed in accordance with their position.

The people who wish for Jinshi to be instated as crown prince. The people who did not. And people who haven’t figured it out which faction to follow.

It finally quieted down once lunch time came around.

“DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!” Jinshi cried.

“There’s nothing I can do.”

He heard a voice refusing him from behind the partition screen. As usual, Baryou was working away from people’s eyes. The visiting officials wouldn’t think that Baryou would be behind the curtains. Thanks to that, that man was the only one who could silently deal with work whenever people came.

“I want to hide too.” Basen looked as exhausted as Jinshi did. He was accompanying Jinshi as his aide-slash-guard, but subtle communication wasn’t his strong suit. Jinshi thought that Basen was already doing well by not punching anyone. Through Basen’s glares, officials here with pointless requests would decrease remarkably. To say it conversely, they were treating Jinshi with contempt.

Was it because he had acted as a eunuch for several years? Or would he be better off with a tougher look?

“I might need more of other things.” Jinshi ran his fingers down the scar on his right cheek.

“Are you thinking of something bad?”

Jinshi gave a start and looked toward the source of the voice. It was Mamei who had prepared lunch. The three Ma siblings have assembled today.

Mamei set the meal on the table. It was easy to eat. He had skipped his meals before, but he couldn’t win against this attendant who had a sisterly disposition. Even if he was busy, she made him eat.

Jinshi ate stewed pork sandwiched between a steamed bun. It was a vulgar way to eat, but his foster siblings were the only ones here, so they would let it pass. Most importantly, Mamei had told him that the least he could do was to eat his meals carefreely. The two brothers won’t go against their elder sister’s words.

“You can eat as you listen to me,” Mamei said.

“…” Jinshi nodded wordlessly. Mamei was female. It was because she was female, that he consequently had left work to her.

“It seems, of the empty seats among the Four Madames, two have been filled.”

Since Baryou and Basen were male, it would be difficult for them to check the state of affairs in the inner palace.

Jinshi had managed the inner palace, if at all. It had been over two years since he'd left that role, but he was more familiar with the state of affairs than a humble official.

"As the Moon Prince said, the seats of Noble Consort and Virtuous Consort will be each occupied by a girl from the empress dowager faction and the empress faction respectively."

Jinshi checked the document that was presented to him and his brows furrowed. The names of people he didn't expect were there.

"As you would expect, with the information from two years ago as it is, there is a lack in personnel. Which one are you interested in?"

Jinshi washed down the bun in his mouth with tea. Mamei immediately handed him a towel, which he used to wipe his face, and then he picked up the document. "The one from the empress dowager's side. Seventeen years of age, entered court last year."

That would be the grandniece of the empress dowager's older brother, Hao. At the same time, the empress dowager's grandniece.

"I believe Hao has one older sister and one younger sister."

"Yes. This would make her the empress dowager's older sister's granddaughter."

"The empress dowager's older sister…" The family tree came to mind. If memory serves, Empress Dowager Anshi's older sister had entered court as a middle-ranking consort at the time. However, the one who got picked was Anshi, who had been her attendant at the time.

The sinful former emperor's chosen–it gave him a vivid reminder of what was related to the Shi clan rebellion.

If there was a point that differed, it would be that when Anshi's pregnancy was known, Anshi's family immediately had her older sister leave the inner palace.

"No, no, no."

"It's not, no no no. There's no one else to take up the mantle."

"It gives me a terrible sense of foreboding."

"Yes. That's why she's designated as Noble Consort, not Pure Consort." Mamei made an expression that reminded him of a raptor. The previous Pure Consort was Loulan. One of the ringleaders of the rebellion and a daughter of the Shi clan.

"Is there no one else we can pick?"

“There’s no one from Hao-*sama*’s main family that could enter court. He may have many distant relatives, but he seems to have truly wanted to clear his older sister’s name.”

“”Ohhh.””

Not just Jinshi, Baryou and Basen also let out a sound of surprise.

From the standpoint of the emperor, that consort would be his cousin’s child. To prevent diseases from consanguineous marriages, as long as there were no other candidates, they would make sure to have a consort that was as distantly related as possible. Among the Four Madames, having Consort Lihua who was a relative of the emperor as the Wise Consort, was also due to this reason. The Four Madames may all be high-ranking consorts, but the Wise Consort was the lowest in terms of hierarchy.

Hao probably didn’t think there was such a rationale behind the selection.

“She was too persistent it seems, so his imperial majesty also visited her bedroom once.”

“…” Jinshi narrowed his eyes and bit into his bun.

Because he was the one who had dealt with it during the time he was a eunuch, it was strangely awkward. Basen didn’t know much about the inner palace, but as if he could feel the awkwardness, he was looking down in embarrassment.

How many times he had slept with a consort of whichever faction. It was a world where that would have a huge influence on its power structure.

“In the same period, the empress dowager faction’s girl entered, a middle-ranking consort came in.”

Jinshi understood what Mamei was saying next.

Jinshi also kept in mind this selection of people.

Gyoku’ou’s adopted daughter had, in the end, become Empress Gyokuyou’s attendant, so it would give a bad impression if they didn’t allow any blood relatives to enter court. Such that, they had picked someone among the children of Gyoku’ou’s other siblings. They had an eye on the suitability of the daughter of Dahai, Gyoku’en’s third son.

The daughter had no say in it. Taking the girl’s feelings into consideration would do no good for politics, but at the time, he understood that it was cruel.

Sometimes, Jinshi was keenly aware that he was a very cowardly person.

“His imperial majesty also visited that girl’s room.”

The emperor is truly cunning, Jinshi thought. Despite his ill health, he had been considering what to bring about in the future. With that, no matter what happens, he would assume that they could find a point of compromise and put an end to this matter, even if not amicably.

“The Moon Prince also assumed that, and encouraged him to select high-ranking consorts, didn’t you?”

Jinshi swallowed again. “Yeah, however, I was just thinking that he is cunning in sowing seeds as well.”

Sowing seeds had two meanings.

A middle-ranking consort visited by the emperor would get promoted to a high-ranking consort. People outside the inner palace would probably suspect the consort’s pregnancy.

He had no idea about the empress faction, but Hao, the head of the empress dowager faction was a relatively manageable man. Better he jump to a conclusion and suspect pregnancy. If he were to have more pawns among his relatives, his thinking would also change.

“There’s no way of knowing if it’ll be a daughter or a son.”

“In society, there are people who are set on the child’s gender from the state of the woman’s womb. Moreover, it seems Hao-sama has said that, over a drink, the reason for the lack of boys among his children and grandchildren was because the pregnant women have been eating nothing but sour foods.”

“Is that true?”

That being said, it would be best for him if he were to change his mind from that.

“You can’t expect it to go well.”

It’s better than doing nothing, Jinshi thought.

Jinshi couldn’t do anything for the emperor. He could only set up an environment where the latter could recover smoothly.

13. The Patient's Intention

It was with the help of the court physicians' persuasion and understanding people that the day of the surgery was finally over the horizon.

"Alrighty, prep is all done. Let's do what we can!"

The court physicians who had been smouldering clenched their fists. They seemed to be bracing themselves in an attempt to shrug off the fear of execution should they fail.

Amidst that, one individual was gazing at the tools nonchalantly. It turned out to be Tianyu.

"Hmhmm."

He even had the composure to hum.

"Why is that bastard—"

"Don't call him that," Auntie Liu scolded Maomao. "He's a skilled one, isn't he?"

"That he is, but he's lacking in morals."

"I suppose you're right," Auntie said calmly, oddly enough. Being Court Physician Liu's younger sister, she must have known Tianyu from before. "He's skilled, but the part of him where he's too capricious *is* concerning."

"Yes."

"But he doesn't get excited in any sort of situation."

"I think that's how he is."

If anything, he was the type to take pleasure, eyes twinkling, in distressing situations. It differed from Rahan's older brother, who was normal no matter the circumstances.

"How about we set our minds on what happens after the surgery in the ways we can?"

"Yes."

Maomao had the sterilised bandages readied. She prepared ointments and oral medicines that were good for infections, as well as anti-itch drugs. She was also

managing the meals, which would depend on the patient's progress after the surgery. She would be cooperating with those in charge of his diet.

With this, there's no way we'd fail.

Maomao also clenched her fists.

"Maomao-san, Maomao-san."

"What is it, Chue-san?"

Chue had shown up at Maomao's workplace for the first time in a while.

That reminds me. It's been some time since I've looked at her injury.

Maomao picked up Chue's arm and checked the movements of her fingers.

"Nooooo. Too sudden. Well, we can hold off on the massage for now. Can you come with me for a bit?" Chue said.

Maomao, tilting her head, spoke to Auntie Liu. Since it was Chue, did that mean she was here as Jinshi's messenger?

"Now isn't a time I can easily leave?" Maomao said.

"Rest assured. I have Court Physician Liu's permission," Chue said.

If so, then it is what it is. Maomao went to speak to Auntie Liu, and then followed Chue.

Chue took her to where Court Physician Liu and Jinshi were. Gaoshun was also there.

All of them, a serious look on their faces, noticed Maomao and Chue arriving.

Maomao courteously bowed her head and waited until Jinshi said, "Okay." She took special care since she was before Court Physician Liu.

"Raise your head."

Maomao wanted to leave but Chue was behind her. She understood that she couldn't leave since she had been summoned. "Can you tell me why you summoned me?"

"His imperial majesty has expressed his reluctance for the surgery tomorrow."

"…" Maomao's jaws dropped. "No, no, no."

"It's not, no, no, no," Jinshi replied sullenly.

“But, but—”

“Maomao, that’s disrespectful.” Court Physician Liu admonished Maomao who was on the verge of speaking bluntly.

Maomao covered her mouth.

Court Physician Liu said, “We all took it as that we’ll be carrying out the surgery. But if his imperial majesty says he won’t—”

“—Then there’s no way we can,” Jinshi concluded.

Gaoshun knitted his brows and he nodded.

“And we even expressly got the Gyoku clan’s Empress Gyokuyou and Gyoku’en’s consent for this.”

Court Physician Liu looked at Maomao. She had told him the gist of what Empress Gyokuyou had called her over to explain.

“There’s also Hao-dono. Even if he doesn’t understand it, he’s not as opposed to it as before. So now was our best chance, if it wasn’t for this.”

Who is this Hao guy?

Probably some big shot Maomao didn’t know. No need to remember, then. Disregard.

However, the one most against the surgery was the patient. That was the most obvious thing, but the fact that he was a big shot turned it into a huge issue.

It doesn’t matter how high the success rate is since there’s no mistaking that he’ll be getting his abdomen cut open.

She understood why Gaoshun was here.

But why did they call for Maomao?

“There’s nothing I can do about this,” she said.

“Listen to the end.”

“Okay.” Maomao covered her mouth again.

“His imperial majesty said that he wants to have a small dinner gathering before the surgery,” Court Physician Liu said bitterly.

Alcohol before surgery. Outrageous.

He was in no condition to drink, so she imagined a banquet wouldn't have anything more than tea.

"He invited A'duo-dono and me to the gathering," Jinshi said.

Maomao gulped.

His imperial majesty. A'duo. Jinshi. It may be unofficial, but this made it an exclusive meeting between parent and child. And Jinshi probably wasn't aware of that truth.

Yeah, I have a really bad feeling about this.

Maomao had no idea what she could do.

"A'duo-dono said she would come if Maomao came along too."

"…" Maomao squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. She looked up at the ceiling and groaned.

I want to refuse. I want to.

But there was no way she could.

What on earth did the emperor want to talk about? Does he want to put his affairs in order by sorting out his troubled feelings before the surgery?

If one of his affairs was the secret of Jinshi's birth, then Jinshi could get a hole in his stomach.

It'd be troubling if both father and son get an infection, a hole or whatever in their guts.

Maomao thought about leaving to get stomach medicine.

"What kind of relation did you have with A'duo-sama when you were a palace lady?" Court Physician Liu looked at her in surprise.

"A'duo-sama said that they were drinking buddies," Chue answered instead.

Well, it's not like we never did drink together.

It'd be a pain to get into the details, so she decided to keep silent.

"So, will you join us?" Jinshi asked.

“Certainly.” Maomao meekly bowed her head.

14. The Confession (1)

With Chue leading the way, Maomao was brought to a palace she had never seen before. It was a short distance from the imperial harem in the imperial court, which would make it the imperial family’s private chambers.

A place you mustn’t ever enter.

Before they entered the palace, Chue gave Maomao a full body search.

“Maomao, you’ve concealed so many things in so many places, just like a squirrel.” Chue was amazed by the herbal medicines, sewing tools, bandages and other whatnot that appeared one after another.

“You’re one to talk, Chue-san,” Maomao said. She had no idea what on earth came out of Chue’s stores.

Maomao had taken a short trip back to the dorms for a bath and a change of clothes after visiting the medical office. It was to make sure that she wouldn’t offend the sovereign with the nice beard at their first meeting in a while, but…

Ahhh, I dun wanna go.

That was the only thing on her mind.

“What’s this?” Chue, in the middle of inspecting her belongings, took out a cloth-wrapped item.

“It’s stomach medicine.”

“Oh ho. Stomach medicine, is it?” Chue tasted the medicine, made a face and returned it to Maomao. “That is all. You may proceed.”

“Okay.” Maomao’s legs were heavy so Chue was pushing her from behind. “Will Chue-san be accompanying me?”

“Unfortunately, Chue-san is on guard duty.”

Maomao felt that Chue's presence alone would light up the mood of the palace, but she wasn't able to count on it. "What about Gaoshun-sama?"

"I wonder. I think Father-in-law would most probably be on guard duty. Rest assured. I am a good daughter-in-law who brings my father-in-law his favourite snacks." Chue held up a bamboo steamer she took out from who-knows-where for Maomao to see. From how it was steaming, it seemed hot so she couldn't imagine how she could have hidden that away.

The long hallway had no windows, but it wasn't dark in any way. There were flickering flames illuminating their path.

Gaoshun was standing at the end of the hallway. He was accompanied by another guard.

He looks familiar?

"Brother-in-law, care for some snacks?" Chue asked.

Upon hearing 'Brother-in-law,' Maomao clapped her hands together. He was Mamei's husband—Ba-something-san.

"No."

"How about wine?"

"Wine would be inappropriate."

"Then how about juice?"

"Where on earth did you take that out from?"

Ba-something-san had the same questions Maomao had.

"Chue, you have work."

"I do, but energy is also important. Rest assured, there's nothing strange in it. Chue will eat it to show you."

Gaoshun, exasperated, looked at Maomao. "Xiao-mao. Head in."

"Okay." Maomao, following Gaoshun's words, headed inside.

The fixtures are even more luxurious than usual.

She stepped on a detailed rug that would take a year to weave one sun. The emperor and A'duo sat on a couch at the back of the room.

Nghhh.

She ended up arriving later than the emperor.

"Sorry for asking you to come," the emperor said.

"Not at all. Forgive me for my tardiness." Even though she had rushed her bath, she wondered if she should have come directly instead.

"Is Yue not here yet?" A'duo asked.

It wasn't the worst thing since Jinshi hadn't arrived yet.

A'duo gestured for Maomao to sit, so she went to sit on the smallest chair, which was a stool. There was another chair, a large one with a backrest, which was probably reserved for Jinshi.

One couch and two chairs. His imperial majesty and A'duo sat on either end of the couch. They weren't flirting, nor were they estranged. It was just the perfect distance between the two of them.

On the round table, there were two porcelain bottles. From what she could tell by looking at the filled glass cups, they contained grape juice and water. There were four cups; two were empty. Going by the number of chairs and cups, it seems there will be four people in attendance today.

Maomao shifted her gaze towards his imperial majesty. His beautiful beard was the same as ever. His complexion wasn't bad either.

No.

It didn't look bad. There were marks where he had rubbed his cheeks. She could tell that he had covered his face with a face powder that matched his natural skin tone.

You wouldn't be able to tell from a distance.

It seems he made an effort to deter his close aides from being suspicious of his poor health.

While Maomao was observing him, she could hear the sound of approaching footsteps.

"I'm late." Jinshi bowed his head with his hands clasped before him. Ever since he stopped pretending to be a eunuch, there was only one person he would lower his head at.

"You may sit," his imperial majesty said. It must be remembered that his guest was Jinshi, whereas A'duo's was Maomao.

"We don't have wine or appetisers. Would you prefer to have fruit juice or water?" A'duo picked up the two porcelain bottles.

Maomao deigned to pour instead, but she was firmly refused. Apparently, she should just sit back and be a guest.

"Fruit juice," Jinshi said.

"Water, please." Maomao wanted to get drunk from wine, but since that wasn't available, there was nothing she could do about it. She requested plain water.

When the two cups were filled, they immediately moved on to the main topic.

"Allow me to explain why I summoned you all for tonight," the emperor said.

"Yes."

A'duo and Maomao were silent. Jinshi was the only one who replied.

A'duo was probably already aware of it. Maomao wasn't allowed to speak of it, so she couldn't. Wouldn't.

"You must have received word from the court physicians that I am reluctant for tomorrow's surgery."

“Yes.”

“Allow me to say this. It’s not that I’m reluctant. I’ve told them that I have things I need to do before I attempt the surgery.”

It seems what he needed to do was this gathering.

“Word is that the success rate for the surgery is high, Rakan’s daughter.”

“…Yes. It is over ninety percent,” Maomao replied, although she was bothered about how he addressed her.

“Then how about leaving it be without the surgery?”

“That would have been fine if the pain had been settled beforehand. However, I believe that court physicians have judged that it would not be the case.”

She mustn’t listen to his imperial majesty’s personal opinion here. If he were to tell her that it didn’t hurt, she would have no choice but to believe him.

“What happens if it gets worse?”

“Appendicitis is a disease where an organ that is near the caecum of your guts becomes swollen. Should that happen, the section called the appendix would fester and rupture. The pus would then spread all over the abdomen, which could bring about other diseases and result in death–as it would be the case now.” Maomao made sure to answer as accurately as she possibly could.

“Then—”

How to deal with it in the case that it wasn’t appendicitis? Do we really need to hold an operation?—His imperial majesty continued to ask these questions.

Maomao explained in the same way she did to Empress Gyokuyou.

A’duo gave her consent as his imperial majesty and Jinshi reconfirmed the information.

I wonder if A’duo-sama is treated like an outsider after all.

She asked some questions but didn’t delve into the details.

And yet, her being here was unsettling and unavoidable.

“Mhm. Looks to me you’ve given me a thorough explanation of what your work is.”

Needless to say, he must have gotten the same details from the court physicians. If she had failed to provide a proper explanation here, he might think that court ladies who assist court physicians would be a mere window dressing of a job, so she was relieved.

No, it's not the time to be relieved.

What his imperial majesty was thinking about—that was the important part right now.

"As you see, the earnest, honest, and stubborn court physicians never guaranteed that they would most definitely save me. Of course, I know that they're doing all they can. However, you have to account for the what-ifs."

"Please do not say nonsense," Jinshi said.

"Is it nonsense? But Zui, for these past couple of years, how many times did the officials propose for a tax increase due to the repeated rash remarks about insect attacks, do you think?"

"Didn't the insects really come?" Jinshi was upset. Zui must be Jinshi's real name. The real name of an imperial that the common people cannot hear.

"That's right. That's why it's not strange for me to prepare for the what-ifs."

I'm lost for words.

Though his imperial majesty was making a gotcha face, he was clutching his stomach. Maomao realised that he was enduring the pain.

"If the case a what-if scenario happens to me, I wish to write down what to do."

Does he want to leave behind a will?

Maomao was on the verge of speaking out despite herself. She shut her mouth.

"For that, I want to hear Zui's opinion."

"My opinion on which matter?"

"Zui, do you want to succeed me?"

Normally, this would be where he would spit out his food or drink. Unfortunately, there was no food and he hadn't started on his drink either.

There was no change in Jinshi's expression. "You have a crown prince."

"A child not even seven yet. How many years will it take before he can rule?"

“You have Gyoku’en-dono.”

“Gyoku’en is elderly.”

“He should have other relatives.” Jinshi sidestepped it.

Maomao had second-guessed about him needing the stomach medicine she had brought with her, but Jinshi’s cheeks cramped a few times—he might actually need it.

“What if he becomes a puppet?” the emperor implored.

“I do not know. However, I understand he would become a puppet of the West to some degree.”

It was a possibility because he hailed from Isei Province.

“He’s an infant. He could die from an illness.” His imperial majesty brought up an ill-omened argument.

Can we not talk about this?

Maomao was going to get the stomachache instead.

“We also have Consort Lihua’s child. Based on grounding alone, there is no one more worthy than Consort Lihua to be the mother of the nation,” Jinshi declared.

Speaking of Consort Lihua’s evaluation, she was the same as Jinshi. The entire country probably saw her as the better candidate over Empress Gyokuyou who was supported by the West.

“Yang. Don’t put Yue on the spot.”

A’duo was the one who called his imperial majesty Yang.

There may be only four people in this room, but she had called the sovereign of this country Yang. Maomao got goosebumps.

“You should just be clear about it. Just blame me for killing the imperial prince,” A’duo said.

Not just goosebumps, she was growing goose feathers.

I want to rush back and eat dinner. Cooking is a pain. I want to eat En’en’s cooking.

Maomao could only stare into the distance.

“No one said such a thing,” the emperor said.

“But had I done it properly, everything could have worked out, wouldn’t it?” Unusually, A’duo was speaking in a self-accusatory way. She was normally confident and dignified.

Maomao heard it as her saying that if she hadn’t switched the babies.

“The child, raised to adulthood, would surely be wise. The outstanding court physician wouldn’t have been banished like he was taken out on either. And the dead children too, if that court physician had been around, would have been raised well under his guidance.”

Certainly, Maomao thought. If A’duo hadn’t switched Jinshi with the real imperial brother, the outstanding court physician—that is, Luomen—might not have been banished.

However, Jinshi, who was currently before her eyes, might have already passed away.

“If there is any problem, then it’s my position. It’s all my doing. All of it is my doing.”

“…ce.”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“SILENCE!”

His imperial majesty, who had risen to his feet, had yelled loud enough that Maomao thought her eardrums would burst. This person normally doesn’t change his expression, but currently, his temple was pulsing and he was sweating heavily.

Stomach medicine won’t be enough!

Perhaps the voice was too loud, there was a knock on the door. It was Gaoshun and the others who were outside.

“…Tell them it’s nothing,” the emperor said.

“Certainly,” Maomao said. She opened the door.

“I heard his imperial majesty’s voice. Is anything the matter?” Gaoshun asked, concerned.

Basen had joined Gaoshun, Ba-something and Chue.

“Tell them it’s nothing, is what I have been told to say,” she replied.

“As if!” Basen flared up, but Gaoshun held him down by the head.

“Understood.” Gaoshun didn’t press further. “If there’s anything, please immediately call for our help.”

“I will.” Maomao closed the door and returned to her original spot.

The stiff atmosphere persisted.

He’s more on edge than before.

Maomao prayed that his appendix didn’t burst here.

“A’duo, shut up for a bit,” the emperor said.

“…” A’duo looked unhappy, but she made no attempts to speak anymore.

“Zui, why do you refuse the imperial throne? You’ll be at the top of the country, you know.” This time, his imperial majesty spoke in a placating tone.

Jinshi’s gaze wavered. “Is being at the top such a good thing?”

“Only I would know.”

Exactly, Maomao thought.

“There is no one aside from me. No, even if there were, they would have been eliminated. After all, my grandmother was that Empress Regnant.”

His imperial majesty called his biological grandmother the Empress Regnant.

He had always existed as the previous emperor’s one and only imperial prince. Due to the previous emperor’s inclinations, they couldn’t take other children into account. He must have been greatly treasured.

Becoming the emperor—that was the only path he was given.

“Zui, you’ve lived merrily in a world that is much less restrictive than what I had. It’s because I’ve doted on you. Having said that, I’ve spoiled you as well. For that, wouldn’t you have to do well after me?”

“What will happen to Empress Gyokuyou? The crown prince?”

“The crown prince is still young.”

“How about establishing a regent? My appearance will only invite trouble at this point in time.”

He’s right, Maomao thought.

It’s contradictory.

He was asking if Jinshi wanted the throne while immediately selecting another imperial prince to be the crown prince. Of course, he might have done so to put the power of the imperial court in check. Officially, he might have placed importance on the children of his imperial majesty.

If the emperor was writing a will, A’duo’s presence would be considered odd under normal circumstances. Empress Gyokuyou would be more acceptable, but there was absolutely no way they could call her here for a will like this.

“Moreover, I am not clever enough to handle multiple women as my partners. One is enough for me,” Jinshi added.

…

“Even though you were the touchstone of the inner palace?”

“PLEASE DON’T CALL ME THAT!” Jinshi cried out. Rather than anger, it was out of panic combined with embarrassment.

Multiple women as partners, huh.

This man had won over so many consorts and palace ladies in the inner palace, but once he grew out of his shell, he was awkward. So awkward yet so over-prepared that Maomao was at a loss. It bothered her.

“If you wish to have one woman as your partner, then you should just bind her to you. You should cherish the one flower among the many in the inner palace.”

“So would it be fine if I do not have children?”

“If you can’t, then it is what it is. In that case, even if you ascend the throne, the crown prince can remain the crown prince.”

Please no.

He was telling Jinshi that he didn’t need to visit the other consorts.

“No, I cannot do that,” Jinshi said flatly.

“Why not? Do you want your own child on the throne after all?”

“Not quite.” Jinshi lowered his eyes. “Cherishing a single consort will make her the enemy of all the other consorts.”

“Then you should just protect her?”

“As powerful as that protection is, all the malice would get around it.” Jinshi clenched his fists.

It was something you’d come to know from staying in the inner palace for a long time. Of the beauty, the deviousness, the ugliness of the women in the emperor’s flower garden.

“Grudges, even if it doesn’t directly harm the person, will afflict the heart.”

“Then what would you do to that one person?”

“Yes… I surely wouldn’t be able to make her, a consort.” Jinshi slowly looked at Maomao. “You may think that our relationship as it stands could withstand everything, but she would be confined to a place that formed because of me. Our relationship might change.”

“Or it might not.”

“It might not seem like it will. But, it would be difficult for me.” Jinshi laughed. It sounded hollow, but his fists were clenched with determination. “If it means I’d have to go as far as to bind her to me alone, setting her free would be the better option.”

Jinshi clenched his fists so tightly his veins were visible.

“That’s quite the romantic thing to say. Is that right, A’duo?” His imperial majesty looked at A’duo. She had been silent the entire time, as she had been told to do so.

A’duo was in a daze, her mouth wide open. And from her widened eyes, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

“A’duo?”

“Mm, yeah. You’re right.” A’duo shook her head as if to flick off that tear.

“A’duo?” His imperial majesty looked bewildered.

“What’s wrong? Can I speak now?” A’duo had returned to her usual tough self. If it wasn’t for the water stains on the couch, people might have believed that her previous

expression and her tears were an illusion. She rested her palm over her face to hide the tearstain. “So, what will you do, Yue?”

“I wish to become his imperial majesty’s retainer. And when the power is handed over, I will become the crown prince’s retainer.”

“Then I can entrust you to deal with the weight of the imperial throne, the crown prince and the painstaking flower garden known as the inner palace?” the emperor asked.

That’s a mean question, Maomao thought.

“A retainer exists to lighten that weight. Also, I wish for the crown prince to be proficient in handling flowers,” Jinshi said awkwardly.

“So I see.”

“…”

His imperial majesty didn’t look at Jinshi. He looked at A’duo. His eyes traced A’duo’s eyes, nose, mouth, and then the palm of her right hand.

As if to ascertain the traces of the tear that had spilled out just now.

15. The Confession (2)

I lost my wits, A'duo thought.

She looked at their expressions and was relieved that the three of them were pretending not to have noticed. She wanted to act as though nothing happened, so that was exactly what she did.

She thought about why Yang had summoned Yue in such a manner before his operation, as well as why he had called for A'duo, who officially wasn't related to this.

She supposed that Yang had no intentions of sparing Yue. Was it due to the promise A'duo had made with him in the past, or did he wish for Yue to follow in his footsteps as Divine since he was Divine himself?

Hence the reason why he had called for the likes of A'duo while writing a will.

By convention, a woman who was not even a consort was unneeded in such an important setting. He should be calling for Gyokuyou, the empress.

He had a way to tie Yue down. He simply had to utilise his position as the emperor to officially name him as his successor. He may have a lot of enemies, but the same could be said for allies. And most importantly, nominating his younger brother instead of his biological son may bewilder everyone, but that could also be resolved.

He could just let them know that Yue was his true-born son right then and there.

Regardless of how Yue took it, no one would be able defy Yang's decree, then.

As the other imperial princes were still young, Yue's capacity to perform official duties was greater. Secondly, he could also shrug off the low position of his birth mother, A'duo.

The only issue was that this matter would be unthinkable for Empress Gyokuyou and her clan.

Yang favoured Gyokuyou. The woman's position aside, he may have also taken a liking to her personality. In the many times A'duo had held a tea party with the other woman, she had found her a good consort. At the very least, she didn't appear to be the type to throw the country into turmoil.

It wasn't that she wanted to trouble Gyokuyou.

There was no need for the imperial prince who should have died to become a trigger now.

A'duo thought what Yang was trying to do was foolish and unacceptable.

But despite his understanding, he ought to be thinking about it.

Yang wasn't Human, but Divine. Everyone else was Human. Yang's actions were permissible as long as he was the emperor–as long as the mandate of heaven did not overturn him.

Being Divine, he was free to use the Human however he liked. Suppose even picking an instructor for the bedroom arts on a whim, he needn't care about its significance. He had the power to take care of one Human for a lifetime. So, he needn't bother to care about it.

Yang was Divine. But, what about Yue? Was Yue also Divine?

However, that was A'duo's concern.

Yue wasn't Divine. He was Human.

Yang looked at A'duo again.

A'duo, while covering the spilt tears behind her palm, looked at Yang. "Yang, Yue is saying such, so what will you do?" She was sure she spoke like she normally did.

"…"

"Will you let us go back for a moment?"

"Sure."

Both Yue and Maomao were shocked by Yang's attitude. Yue probably didn't understand why A'duo was here, and he must also be lost about why she had called for Maomao.

Yue was sharp and yet he hadn't realised it.

There was once a time he called Yang, "Father."

He must have been told many times that his vibes were similar to A'duo's.

In actuality, A'duo had also acted as Yue's body double.

If he had noticed and pretended otherwise, that was fine.

Or could Suiren have fooled him well?

Either way was fine.

For A'duo, Yue was Human. She had confirmed that.

And there was probably a shock from Yang's standpoint.

"May I?" Yue asked Yang.

"Yeah."

"What will happen to tomorrow's surgery?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll obediently put myself through it."

At those words, Maomao looked more relieved than Yue did.

"What will you do about the will?" Yue looked like he wanted to know, so A'duo asked in his stead.

"I'll write it later. Return for now."

Yue's expression was brimming with unease. Maomao also looked uneasy, but her expression wasn't as grave, as though the emperor's declaration that he'd undergo the surgery was more important.

"Well then, excuse me." After Yue and Maomao, A'duo also made to leave.

"Wait," Yang said.

"What?"

"I have business with you." He wasn't letting go of her hand.

"Alright, I got it. You two, don't mind us and go back."

Yue and Maomao exchanged glances and left the room.

When it became quiet, Yang finally let go.

"I'm not going to write on your behalf. If you die, I'd be executed for forgery," A'duo said.

"As if that would happen." Yang looked up at the ceiling.

"Will you not write Yue down as the next emperor?"

Yang remained silent.

“If it’s Yue, should he ascend the throne, he’ll surely do a good job. He’d probably abdicate the moment the crown prince grows up.”

Yang was still looking up.

“He won’t be a wise emperor that would leave a mark in history, nor will he be a foolish one.”

“…Should I write him down?”

“Nah. I’m not suited to be the mother of the nation, right?” A’duo said self-deprecatingly. “I was so sure you would tell Yue about my mistake.”

“Wasn’t it you who assumed that and brought in an outsider, A’duo?”

“You can tell her with no problems. Maomao is clever.”

“She’s Rakan’s daughter, after all.”

She realised why Yang was looking at the ceiling. He wasn’t letting the tears that had welled up in his eyes spill over.

“A’duo. Do you hate me?”

“Yang. On the contrary, why would you think I won’t?”

“Is there anything you’re lacking?”

“Hahaha, that’s the part.”

Yang treated A’duo well. When he was the crown prince and even when he became the emperor, he made sure that A’duo was in want for nothing. Even after she left the inner palace, he accommodated her and was open about his special treatment of her to everyone.

“Did you want to make me the mother of the nation?”

“Weren’t you the one who said that?’ Fluid streamed from Yang’s eyes down his cheeks. “A’duo, you will keep your promise with me. As long as the promise isn’t scrapped, you’ll keep it, right?”

“That’s right. How many times have you broken it?” A’duo reached out to her surprised younger brother figure. She didn’t wipe away his tears. Instead, she tugged his beard.

“And there was you installing a crown prince in place of Yue. You must have thought that I would stay while the child was still an infant, right?”

“Yeah, because A’duo is upright.”

She got angry. She tugged his beard so hard she nearly plucked it off. “The appointing of a young crown prince was a means to manage the other retainers well. When the time comes, you planned to swap him with Yue who had been raised splendidly? Or do you mean to scrap your promise to me? If you’re scrapping it, you’re better off declaring it as soon as you can. How many years, how many decades, do you plan to keep feeding me?”

Indecisive. Yang had permitted something that should not be permissible.

“You should be more decisive in politics. You should have cut off a useless burden like me at the earliest opportunity!”

“You’re not a burden.”

“Aren’t I one? How many years do you think I’ve been laughed at as a useless consort? You know nothing. You make light of how fights between women are nothing as bad as men. You’re right–there are fewer direct fistfights. Only the occasional stabbing, the occasional poisoning and the occasional lighting people on fire.”

A’duo tugged Yang’s beard to force him to look at her. The brimming tears overflowed and flung onto her cheeks. “I can’t give birth anymore. Why didn’t you scrap that promise when that child died?”

“A’duo. I won’t ever scrap the promise myself. Once you know that promise cannot be kept, you’ll take it upon yourself to go somewhere no matter what.”

But she had stayed behind.

“Is that how you realised that the babies were switched?” A’duo laughed despite herself. She hadn’t intended to betray her baby swap accomplices, Anshi and Suiren, and yet she had always been suspicious that they had revealed it to Yang. “You know how I act really well, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“So you would have no way of forgetting what I wanted to do.”

“Yeah.”

When Yang was the crown prince, they had hated studying so they often slipped out to hide away to eat snacks. They would chat while eating, so it was a topic they had brought up.

“There is no way I can become an official. So I wonder if I can become a merchant instead.”

How many years ago was it when A’duo, leaning against the handrails, said such a thing? If she became his instructor in the bedroom arts, she wouldn’t be able to leave the palace, let alone become a merchant.

There was no way he wouldn’t have known.

“Making me your instructor in the bedroom arts would have been a mere whim for you, Yang, but for me, it had been the problem of my life.”

“…If A’duo became a merchant, you wouldn’t have returned to the imperial court.” Yang’s hair, beginning to be mixed with white strands, drooped softly. “Wouldn’t you leave me behind and never come back?”

“Coming back isn’t the issue. If Yang never tells me to, I probably won’t be able to meet you again.”

A’duo didn’t have the power to summon Yang. The opposite would be better.

Their positions were different by birth. If her mother Suiren hadn’t been his wetnurse, he would be someone she would have never met in her lifetime.

She understood what Yang wanted to say. Yang could get anything, but couldn’t go everywhere.

The idea of A’duo going somewhere far away must have frightened him. Especially when he was young at twelve or thirteen years; he wouldn’t have thought deeply about it.

“I didn’t want you to go anywhere, which was why I tried to keep the promise.”

“A promise that benefits no one? Even though you know that I actually didn’t want to be the mother of the country?”

“That’s right.”

Yang, as Divine, owned the Human known as A’duo.

What will Yang’s son, Yue, do?

Will he go down the same path as his father? She had called for Maomao for that. She wanted to check to see if Maomao was a possession or not.

She worried over nothing.

Yue wasn't Divine, but Human.

"A'duo. Hypothetically, if you were to have become a merchant, would you have remained my friend?"

"For as much as you want if you let me be a purveyor to the imperial household."

"Hahaha." Yang laughed as tears spilled.

"Hey. Can you do me a favour?" A'duo let go of his beard and wrapped her hands around his head. She leaned her face over to his. "I will scrap the promise myself."

"So you mean to leave my side?"

A'duo desperately held down Yang who was trying to lift his face. "No, I'll stay until the end. The burdens in my palace are so great that no one else would be able to take them on completely."

Sui and the other Shi clan children, as well as the Sha'ou priestess.

"Which is why I want you to let Yue do whatever he wants," she whispered into Yang's ear. "I'll listen to your grumbles for as long as you want. Until the day I die."

A'duo was aware of how arrogant her favour was.

A'duo's child was Yue alone, but Yang had other children besides Yue. And yet she was telling him to treat Yue alone differently.

"That child is an imperial, but he's much too Human. He's too kind," she said.

"That's true."

"He has the potential to become a wise ruler, but at the same time, I don't think he'll live long."

"That might be the case."

What an emperor needed wasn't kindness, but compassion. A ruler who donates to those below him, who regards himself as the same as the citizens, would fall ill. From the start, Yue had no intentions of involving himself with the people who could cure that illness.

She felt sorry for Gyokuyou, Lihua, and the other consorts.

A’duo had asked Yang for something that was incredibly selfish.

To protect her own child, she tried to foist the duty onto the other children.

“You failed. You made a mistake when you played that bet to leave him in charge of the management of the inner palace. Why did you make such a bet with him?”

“A’duo. That one is too surprisingly clever.”

“Hahaha. He kept seducing the consorts in the inner palace.”

“But for that, he never laid his hands on them.”

“Yang sees childmaking as a way to save trouble, whereas Yue probably understands how very bothersome it is.”

Yang’s head shook. It seems he could only laugh.

“Yang, sleep earlier. Tomorrow is when you have your painful, painful surgery.”

“Don’t provoke me. I know. I’ll sleep as soon as I can. It’ll be a major incident if me having no energy from lack of sleep would have a strange effect on it.”

“Will you not write the will?”

“I have no intentions of dying.”

“Write it anyway. Even if it fails, the court physicians have no sin.” A’duo let go of Yang’s head.

“You’re assuming that I’d be killed, huh.” Yang was puffing his cheeks, despite being old enough to know better.

“Maomao is also assisting in the surgery. If it fails, you’ll make an enemy out of the Ra clan.”

“Spare me. Rakan picked on me so terribly because of the incident where his uncle was banished.”

“When it fails, he won’t be picking on you since you won’t exist in this world.”

“Like I said, stop assuming that I’ll die.” While saying that, Yang picked up the brush.

“Your handwriting is awful as always.”

“Shut your mouth.”

A’duo and Yang began to write the will while chatting like they were ten-year-olds.

Yang was Divine and A’duo was Human. Even so, they can still act as friends.

16. The Imperial Prince and His Wet Nurse

The surgery ended safely. No, many things happened before it was over, but it was a success so they took it as a win.

Many things *did* happen, though…

And so, it was Maomao’s group’s turn. The surgical procedure may be over, but if something were to go wrong afterwards and he dies, they would be in a world of trouble.

Of course, his imperial majesty, post-surgery, was provided a special room. The bedroom wasn’t the usual kind, as it had another room constructed nearby. There was also a room where the court physicians would be permanently stationed in the vicinity.

The pure white room was minimally furnished. They had held back from gorgeous fixtures to make the room easier to clean since these would collect less dust.

The bed was where they put special care into. As he wouldn’t be able to turn over in bed, they laid out a mattress that was the perfect firmness, not too soft, not too hard, with extra bumps to align with his body shape.

What was unusual was how they had joined two beds together. Why such a thing? It was so that the sheets could be changed every single day. Sweat and sebum would invite mould and bugs. A few days wouldn’t be an issue, but the emperor was one who changed beds every day. For his comfort, they would change the bed even if just for the fact that it was damp from his sweat. When that happened, he would be moved to the other bed.

How much does that super high-quality bed cost?

The decorations weren’t particularly fancy, but how many silk garments could be produced from even one of those canopy curtains?

There had been talks in the beginning about constructing completely identical rooms, so he could be moved to another room every time the sheets were changed and the room cleaned. However, that proved unfeasible, so they settled with this. Note, during cleaning, they were careful about the ventilation, paying special care to not stir up the dust.

Bandages were changed twice daily. This was done when Court Physician Liu and his team came to monitor the injury. The court physicians believed that once a day was sufficient, but there were members among the tiresome high officials who asked for the unreasonable of checking every half-dual hour. Apparently, they never considered that changing the bandages more often would increase the possibility of introducing poison to the open wound.

His diet was liquid food.

It reminded Maomao of the time she nursed Consort Lihua. His imperial majesty would wince every time the rice water was brought over. The incision in his abdomen hurt, but the chronic stomach pain and nausea had subsided.

Note that it was the court physicians who changed his clothes and gave him a sponge bath when they changed his bandages. The reason they didn't leave this job to attendants or court ladies was to prevent lustful women from approaching him.

As you would expect, the bearded master doesn't have the vitality to lay his hands on them.

The ladies might get weird ideas and take their chances.

Of course, such outrageous actions towards a patient would be unpermissible. Not only that, they also had Gyokuyou the empress refrain from visiting.

The room cleaning was done by Maomao, Auntie Liu, as well as Suiren who had been specially recruited for this.

And right now, Maomao was in the middle of cleaning the room with Suiren. Taking extra care to not stir up the dust, her sweeping was thorough and swift. Thinking back to the time she was working under Jinshi, Maomao withered a little. While she didn't get picked on, she had memories of the strict training she had to undergo.

This person can do anything.

The woman was Jinshi's wet nurse and had been one for the emperor as well in the past. And no doubt, it was because of that detail they could address each other without reserve.

"There are no flowers in this place, huh."

As she was cleaning, she heard a voice from behind the bed curtain.

"My, how terrible. Whose fault do you think that it is that I became such an old white-haired granny?" Suiren replied as she hummed a tune.

The guard was an unfamiliar face, but he was probably a member of the Ma clan. He was watching Suiren in great trepidation. Here was a granny who could crack jokes at the person who stood at the top of the country.

Under normal circumstances, it would have you arrested for blasphemy.

If anything, the emperor, confined to bed with no entertainment, was enjoying Suiren's jokes. He would probably find fault with stopping Suiren instead.

"Who do you think drank my milk and had me change his diapers?"

"I was a baby then. You can't expect me to remember that. Although…I am thankful you protected me from assassins."

Maomao only heard that Suiren was the legendary attendant who protected the young empress dowager. Though she wanted to ask about the kind of fight scene that happened, she decided that it was no good to pry too deeply into it, continuing to polish the floor with a dry cloth.

"Did it also happen to A'duo?" the emperor asked.

"Yes. You didn't know?" Suiren replied.

"Yeah."

"Oh my."

Maomao sensed there was some resentment lurking deep within that calm voice.

"She really should have saved up money and left as soon as she could."

"Is that what you think?"

"I mean, she was a tomboy who hated wearing girl clothes. I doubt she would have become a court lady even if she stayed in the imperial court, don't you think so? She asked me if she should use up the money she saved to start a business."

"Looks like I got in the way of her plans."

"I am glad you understand."

Not just the guard, Maomao was also feeling chills. That being said, she knew that the emperor wouldn't punish Suiren, so she took a breath and settled down.

"By the way, Suiren. Regarding Zui."

“Yes.”

“Does he know?”

Know about what?

Maomao thought it had something to do with Jinshi’s birth. The day before the surgery, she had been made to leave the room earlier alongside Jinshi. Did Jinshi realise he was the child of the emperor and A’duo, or did he not? Maomao didn’t know about that.

“Whether he knows or not, it doesn’t matter,” Suiren said, without a pause in her hand’s movements.

She’s right.

Nothing will change whether Jinshi knew or not. The thing that would change would be the people around him.

And if the emperor himself never brought it up, nothing would happen. He probably won’t talk about it anymore.

“Now then, Young Master. Your nanny is leaving the room. Will you be lonely? I suppose I could read you a bedtime story.”

Pfft!

Maomao, nearly bursting out in laughter, spontaneously covered her mouth. It was good that she did, but she had a dust cloth in hand. She gagged.

Maomao wasn’t the only one having it hard–the guard was too. He was biting his lips, digging his nails into his thighs to hold back from laughing.

“Quit it with the young master.”

That familiar phrase was exactly how Jinshi would say it.